PART III.

I.

WHEN the blind are operated on for the restoration of sight, the same succouring hand which has opened to them the visible world, immediately shuts out the bright prospect again, for a time. A bandage is passed over the eyes, lest in the first tenderness of the recovered sense, it should be fatally affected by the sudden transition from darkness to light. But between the awful blank of total privation of vision, and the temporary blank of vision merely veiled, there lies the widest difference. In the moment of their restoration, the blind have had one glimpse of light, flashing on them in an overpowering gleam of brightness, which the thickest, closest veiling cannot extinguish. The new darkness is not like the void darkness of old; it is filled with changing visions of brilliant colours and ever-varying forms, rising, falling, whirling hither and thither with every second. Even when the handkerchief is passed over them, the once sightless eyes, though bandaged fast, are yet not blinded as they were before.

It was so with my mental vision. After the utter oblivion and darkness of a deep swoon, consciousness flashed like light on my mind, when I found myself in my father's presence, and in my own home. But, almost at the very moment when I first awakened to the bewildering influence of that sight, a new darkness fell upon my faculties--a darkness, this time, which was not utter oblivion; a peopled darkness, like that which the bandage casts over the opened eyes of the blind.

I had sensations, I had thoughts, I had visions, now--but they all acted in the frightful self-concentration of delirium. The lapse of time, the march of events, the alternation of day and night, the persons who moved about me, the words they spoke, the offices of kindness they did for me--all these were annihilated from the period when I closed my eyes again, after having opened them for an instant on my father, in my own study.

My first sensation (how soon it came after I had been brought home, I know not) was of a terrible heat; a steady, blazing heat, which seemed to have shrivelled and burnt up the whole of the little world around me, and to have left me alone to suffer, but never to consume in it. After this, came a quick, restless, unintermittent toiling of obscure thought, ever in the same

darkened sphere, ever on the same impenetrable subject, ever failing to reach some distant and visionary result. It was as if something were imprisoned in my mind, and moving always to and fro in it--moving, but never getting free.

Soon, these thoughts began to take a form that I could recognise.

In the clinging heat and fierce seething fever, to which neither waking nor sleeping brought a breath of freshness or a dream of change, I began to act my part over again, in the events that had passed, but in a strangely altered character. Now, instead of placing implicit trust in others, as I had done; instead of failing to discover a significance and a warning in each circumstance as it arose, I was suspicious from the first--suspicious of Margaret, of her father, of her mother, of Mannion, of the very servants in the house. In the hideous phantasmagoria of my own calamity on which I now looked, my position was reversed. Every event of the doomed year of my probation was revived. But the doom itself, the night-scene of horror through which I had passed, had utterly vanished from my memory. This lost recollection, it was the one unending toil of my wandering mind to recover, and I never got it back. None who have not suffered as I suffered then, can imagine with what a burning rage of determination I followed past events in my delirium, one by one, for days and nights together,--followed, to get to the end which I knew was beyond, but which I never could see, not even by glimpses, for a moment at a time.

However my visions might alter in their course of succession, they always began with the night when Mannion returned from the continent to North Villa. I stood again in the drawing-room; I saw him enter; I marked the slight confusion of Margaret; and instantly doubted her. I noticed his unwillingness to meet her eye or mine; I looked on the sinister stillness of his face; and suspected him. From that moment, love vanished, and hatred came in its place. I began to watch; to garner up slight circumstances which confirmed my suspicions; to wait craftily for the day when I should discover, judge, and punish them both--the day of disclosure and retribution that never came.

Sometimes, I was again with Mannion, in his house, on the night of the storm. I detected in every word he spoke an artful lure to trap me into trusting him as my second father, more than as my friend. I heard in the tempest sounds which mysteriously interrupted, or mingled with, my answers, voices supernaturally warning me of my enemy, each time that I spoke to him. I saw once more the hideous smile of triumph on his face, as I took leave of him on the doorstep: and saw it, this time, not as an illusion

produced by a flash of lightning, but as a frightful reality which the lightning disclosed.

Sometimes, I was again in the garden at North Villa accidentally overhearing the conversation between Margaret and her mother--overhearing what deceit she was willing to commit, for the sake of getting a new dress--then going into the room, and seeing her assume her usual manner on meeting me, as if no such words as I had listened to but the moment before, had ever proceeded from her lips. Or, I saw her on that other morning, when, to revenge the death of her bird, she would have killed with her own hand the one pet companion that her sick mother possessed. Now, no generous, trusting love blinded me to the real meaning of such events as these. Now, instead of regarding them as little weaknesses of beauty, and little errors of youth, I saw them as timely warnings, which bade me remember when the day of my vengeance came, that in the contriving of the iniquity on which they were both bent, the woman had been as vile as the man.

Sometimes, I was once more on my way to North Villa, after my week's absence at our country house. I saw again the change in Margaret since I had left her--the paleness, the restlessness, the appearance of agitation. I took the hand of Mannion, and started as I felt its deadly coldness, and remarked the strange alteration in his manner. When they accounted for these changes by telling me that both had been ill, in different ways, since my departure, I detected the miserable lie at once; I knew that an evil advantage had been taken of my absence; that the plot against me was fast advancing towards consummation: and that, at the sight of their victim, even the two wretches who were compassing my dishonour could not repress all outward manifestation of their guilt.

Sometimes, the figure of Mrs. Sherwin appeared to me, wan and weary, and mournful with a ghostly mournfulness. Again I watched her, and listened to her; but now with eager curiosity, with breathless attention. Once more, I saw her shudder when Mannion's cold eyes turned on her face--I marked the anxious, imploring look that she cast on Margaret and on me--I heard her confused, unwilling answer, when I inquired the cause of her dislike of the man in whom her husband placed the most implicit trust--I listened to her abrupt, inexplicable injunction to "watch continually over my wife, and keep bad people from her." All these different circumstances occurred again as vividly as in the reality; but I did not now account for them, as I had once accounted for them, by convincing myself that Mrs. Sherwin's mind was wandering, and that her bodily sufferings had affected her intellect. I saw immediately, that she suspected Mannion, and dared not openly confess her suspicions; I saw, that in the stillness, and abandonment, and self-

concentration of her neglected life, she had been watching more vigilantly than others had watched; I detected in every one of her despised gestures, and looks, and halting words, the same concealed warning ever lying beneath the surface; I knew they had not succeeded in deceiving her; I was determined they should not succeed in deceiving me.

It was oftenest at this point, that my restless memory recoiled before the impenetrable darkness which forbade it to see further--to see on to the last evening, to the fatal night. It was oftenest at this point, that I toiled and struggled back, over and over again, to seek once more the lost events of the End, through the events of the Beginning. How often my wandering thoughts thus incessantly and desperately traced and retraced their way over their own fever track, I cannot tell: but there came a time when they suddenly ceased to torment me; when the heavy burden that was on my mind fell off; when a sudden strength and fury possessed me, and I plunged down through a vast darkness into a world whose daylight was all radiant flame. Giant phantoms mustered by millions, flashing white as lightning in the ruddy air. They rushed on me with hurricane speed; their wings fanned me with fiery breezes; and the echo of their thunder-music was like the groaning and rending of an earthquake, as they tore me away with them on their whirlwind course.

Away! to a City of Palaces, to measureless halls, and arches, and domes, soaring one above another, till their flashing ruby summits are lost in the burning void, high overhead. On! through and through these mountain-piles, into countless, limitless corridors, reared on pillars lurid and rosy as molten lava. Far down the corridors rise visions of flying phantoms, ever at the same distance before us--their raving voices clanging like the hammers of a thousand forges. Still on and on; faster and faster, for days, years, centuries together, till there comes, stealing slowly forward to meet us, a shadow--a vast, stealthy, gliding shadow--the first darkness that has ever been shed over that world of blazing light! It comes nearer--nearer and nearer softly, till it touches the front ranks of our phantom troop. Then in an instant, our rushing progress is checked: the thunder-music of our wild march stops; the raving voices of the spectres ahead, cease; a horror of blank stillness is all about us--and as the shadow creeps onward and onward, until we are enveloped in it from front to rear, we shiver with icy cold under the fiery air and amid the lurid lava pillars which hem us in on either side.

A silence, like no silence ever known on earth; a darkening of the shadow, blacker than the blackest night in the thickest wood--a pause--then, a sound as of the heavy air being cleft asunder; and then, an apparition of two

figures coming on out of the shadow--two monsters stretching forth their gnarled yellow talons to grasp at us; leaving on their track a green decay, oozing and shining with a sickly light. Beyond and around me, as I stood in the midst of them, the phantom troop dropped into formless masses, while the monsters advanced. They came close to me; and I alone, of all the myriads around, changed not at their approach. Each laid a talon on my shoulder--each raised a veil which was one hideous net-work of twining worms. I saw through the ghastly corruption of their faces the look that told me who they were--the monstrous iniquities incarnate in monstrous forms; the fiend-souls made visible in fiend-shapes--Margaret and Mannion!

A moment more! and I was alone with those two. Not a wreck of the phantom-multitude remained; the towering city, the gleaming corridors, the fire-bright radiance had vanished. We stood on a wilderness--a still, black lake of dead waters was before us; a white, faint, misty light shone on us. Outspread over the noisome ground lay the ruins of a house, rooted up and overthrown to its foundations. The demon figures, still watching on either side of me, drew me slowly forward to the fallen stones, and pointed to two dead bodies lying among them.

My father!--my sister!--both cold and still, and whiter than the white light that showed them to me. The demons at my side stretched out their crooked talons, and forbade me to kneel before my father, or to kiss Clara's wan face, before I went to torment. They struck me motionless where I stood--and unveiled their hideous faces once more, jeering at me in triumph. Anon, the lake of black waters heaved up and overflowed, and noiselessly sucked us away into its central depths--depths that were endless; depths of rayless darkness, in which we slowly eddied round and round, deeper and deeper down at every turn. I felt the bodies of my father and my sister touching me in cold contact: I stretched out my arms to clasp them and sink with them; and the demon pair glided between us, and separated me from them. This vain striving to join myself to my dead kindred when we touched each other in the slow, endless whirlpool, ever continued and was ever frustrated in the same way. Still we sank apart, down the black gulphs of the lake; still there was no light, no sound, no change, no pause of repose--and this was eternity: the eternity of Hell!

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Such was one dream-vision out of many that I saw. It must have been at this time that men were set to watch me day and night (as I afterwards heard), in order that I might be held down in my bed, when a paroxysm of convulsive strength made me dangerous to myself and to all about me. The

period too when the doctors announced that the fever had seized on my brain, and was getting the better of their skill, must have been this period.

But though they gave up my life as lost, I was not to die. There came a time, at last, when the gnawing fever lost its hold; and I awoke faintly one morning to a new existence--to a life frail and helpless as the life of a new-born babe.

I was too weak to move, to speak, to open my eyes, to exert in the smallest degree any one faculty, bodily or mental, that I possessed. The first sense of which I regained the use, was the sense of hearing; and the first sound that I recognised, was of a light footstep which mysteriously approached, paused, and then retired again gently outside my door. The hearing of this sound was my first pleasure, the waiting for its repetition my first source of happy expectation, since I had been ill. Once more the footsteps approached--paused a moment--then seemed to retire as before--then returned slowly. A sigh, very faint and trembling; a whisper of which I could not yet distinguish the import, caught my ear--and after that, there was silence. Still I waited (oh, how happily and calmly!) to hear the whisper soon repeated, and to hear it better when it next came. Ere long, for the third time, the footsteps advanced, and the whispering accents sounded again. I could now hear that they pronounced my name--once, twice, three times--very softly and imploringly, as if to beg the answer which I was still too weak to give. But I knew the voice: I knew it was Clara's. Long after it had ceased, the whisper lingered gently on my ear, like a lullaby that alternately soothed me to slumber, and welcomed me to wakefulness. It seemed to be thrilling through my frame with a tender, reviving influence--the same influence which the sunshine had, weeks afterwards, when I enjoyed it for the first time out of doors.

The next sound that came to me was audible in my room; audible sometimes, close at my pillow. It was the simplest sound imaginable--nothing but the soft rustling of a woman's dress. And yet, I heard in it innumerable harmonies, sweet changes, and pauses minute beyond all definition. I could only open my eyes for a minute at a time, and even then, could not fix them steadily on anything; but I knew that the rustling dress was Clara's; and fresh sensations seemed to throng upon me, as I listened to the sound which told me that she was in the room. I felt the soft summer air on my face; I enjoyed the sweet scent of flowers, wafted on that air; and once, when my door was left open for a moment, the twittering of birds in the aviary down stairs, rang with exquisite clearness and sweetness on my ear. It was thus that my faculties strengthened, hour by hour, always in the same gradual way, from the time when I first heard the footstep and the

whisper outside my chamber-door.

One evening I awoke from a cool, dreamless sleep; and, seeing Clara sitting by my bedside, faintly uttered her name, and moved my wasted hand to take hers. As I saw the calm, familiar face bending over me; the anxious eyes looking tenderly and lovingly into mine--as the last melancholy glory of sunset hovered on my bed, and the air, sinking already into its twilight repose, came softly and more softly into the room--as my sister took me in her arms, and raising me on my weary pillow, bade me for her sake lie hushed and patient a little longer--the memory of the ruin and the shame that had overwhelmed me; the memory of my love that had become an infamy; and of my brief year's hope miserably fulfilled by a life of despair, swelled darkly over my heart. The red, retiring rays of sunset just lingered at that moment on my face. Clara knelt down by my pillow, and held up her handkerchief to shade my eyes--"God has given you back to us, Basil," she whispered, "to make us happier than ever." As she spoke, the springs of the grief so long pent up within me were loosened; hot tears dropped heavily and quickly from my eyes; and I wept for the first time since the night of horror which had stretched me where I now lay--wept in my sister's arms, at that quiet evening hour, for the lost honour, the lost hope, the lost happiness that had gone from me for ever in my youth!

II.

Darkly and wearily the days of my recovery went on. After that first outburst of sorrow on the evening when I recognised my sister, and murmured her name as she sat by my side, there sank over all my faculties a dull, heavy trance of mental pain.

I dare not describe what remembrances of the guilty woman who had deceived and ruined me, now gnawed unceasingly and poisonously at my heart. My bodily strength feebly revived; but my mental energies never showed a sign of recovering with them. My father's considerate forbearance, Clara's sorrowful reserve in touching on the subject of my long illness, or of the wild words which had escaped me in my delirium, mutely and gently warned me that the time was come when I owed the tardy atonement of confession to the family that I had disgraced; and still, I had no courage to speak, no resolution to endure. The great misery of the past, shut out from me the present and the future alike--every active power of my mind seemed to be destroyed hopelessly and for ever.

There were moments--most often at the early morning hours, while the heaviness of the night's sleep still hung over me in my wakefulness--when I could hardly realise the calamity which had overwhelmed me; when it seemed that I must have dreamt, during the night, of scenes of crime and woe and heavy trial which had never actually taken place. What was the secret of the terrible influence which--let her even be the vilest of the vile--Mannion must have possessed over Margaret Sherwin, to induce her to sacrifice me to him? Even the crime itself was not more hideous and more incredible than the mystery in which its evil motives, and the manner of its evil ripening, were still impenetrably veiled.

Mannion! It was a strange result of the mental malady under which I suffered, that, though the thought of Mannion was now inextricably connected with every thought of Margaret, I never once asked myself, or had an idea of asking myself, for days together, after my convalescence, what had been the issue of our struggle, for him. In the despair of first awakening to a perfect sense of the calamity which had been hurled on me from the hand of my wife--in the misery of first clearly connecting together, after the wanderings of delirium, the Margaret to whom with my hand I had given all my heart, with the Margaret who had trampled on the gift and ruined the giver--all minor thoughts and minor feelings, all motives of revengeful curiosity or of personal apprehension were suppressed. And yet, the time

was soon to arrive when that lost thought of inquiry into Mannion's fate, was to become the one master-thought that possessed me--the thought that gave back its vigilance to my intellect, and its manhood to my heart.

One evening I was sitting alone in my room. My father had taken Clara out for a little air and exercise, and the servant had gone away at my own desire. It was in this quiet and solitude, when the darkness was fast approaching, when the view from my window was at its loneliest, when my mind was growing listless and confused as the weary day wore out--it was exactly at this time that the thought suddenly and mysteriously flashed across me: Had Mannion been taken up from the stones on which I had hurled him, a living man or a dead?

I instinctively started to my feet with something of the vigour of my former health; repeating the question to myself; and feeling, as I unconsciously murmured aloud the few words which expressed it, that my life had purposes and duties, trials and achievements, which were yet to be fulfilled. How could I instantly solve the momentous doubt which had now, for the first time, crossed my mind?

One moment I paused in eager consideration--the next, I descended to the library. A daily newspaper was kept there, filed for reference. I might possibly decide the fatal question in a few moments by consulting it. In my burning anxiety and impatience I could hardly handle the leaves or see the letters, as I tried to turn back to the right date--the day (oh anguish of remembrance!) on which I was to have claimed Margaret Sherwin as my wife!

At last, I found the number I desired; but the closely-printed columns swam before me as I looked at them. A glass of water stood on a table near me--I dipped my handkerchief in it, and cooled my throbbing eyes. The destiny of my future life might be decided by the discovery I was now about to make!

I locked the door to guard against all intrusion, and then returned to my task--returned to my momentous search--slowly tracing my way through the paper, paragraph by paragraph, column by column.

On the last page, and close to the end, I read these lines:

"MYSTERIOUS OCCURRENCE.

"About one o'clock this morning, a gentleman was discovered lying on his face in the middle of the road, in Westwood Square, by the policeman on

duty. The unfortunate man was to all appearance dead. He had fallen on a part of the road which had been recently macadamised; and his face, we are informed, is frightfully mutilated by contact with the granite. The policeman conveyed him to the neighbouring hospital, where it was discovered that he was still alive, and the promptest attentions were immediately paid him. We understand that the surgeon in attendance considers it absolutely impossible that he could have been injured as he was, except by having been violently thrown down on his face, either by a vehicle driven at a furious rate, or by a savage attack from some person or persons unknown. In the latter case, robbery could not have been the motive; for the unfortunate man's watch, purse, and ring were all found about him. No cards of address or letters of any kind were discovered in his pockets, and his linen and handkerchief were only marked with the letter M. He was dressed in evening costume--entirely in black. After what has been already said about the injuries to his face, any recognisable personal description of him is, for the present, unfortunately out of the question. We wait with much anxiety to gain some further insight into this mysterious affair, when the sufferer is restored to consciousness. The last particulars which our reporter was able to collect at the hospital were, that the surgeon expected to save his patient's life, and the sight of one of his eyes. The sight of the other is understood to be entirely destroyed."

With sensations of horror which I could not then, and cannot now analyse, I turned to the next day's paper; but found in it no further reference to the object of my search. In the number for the day after, however, the subject was resumed in these words:

"The mystery of the accident in Westwood Square thickens. The sufferer is restored to consciousness; he is perfectly competent to hear and understand what is said to him, and is able to articulate, but not very plainly, and only for a moment or so, at a time. The authorities at the hospital anticipated, as we did, that, on the patient's regaining his senses, some information of the manner in which the terrible accident from which he is suffering was caused, would be obtained from him. But, to the astonishment of every one, he positively refuses to answer any questions as to the circumstances under which his frightful injuries were inflicted. With the same unaccountable secrecy, he declines to tell his name, his place of abode, or the names of any friends to whom notice of his situation might be communicated. It is quite in vain to press him for any reason for this extraordinary course of conduct--he appears to be a man of very unusual firmness of character; and his refusal to explain himself in any way, is evidently no mere caprice of the moment.

All this leads to the conjecture that the injuries he has sustained were inflicted on him from some motive of private vengeance; and that certain persons are concerned in this disgraceful affair, whom he is unwilling to expose to public odium, for some secret reason which it is impossible to guess at. We understand that he bears the severe pain consequent upon his situation, in such a manner as to astonish every person about him--no agony draws from him a word or a sigh. He displayed no emotion even when the surgeons informed him that the sight of one of his eyes was hopelessly destroyed; and merely asked to be supplied with writing materials as soon as he could see to use them, when he was told that the sight of the other would be saved. He further added, we are informed, that he was in a position to reward the hospital authorities for any trouble he gave, by making a present to the funds of the charity, as soon as he should be discharged as cured. His coolness in the midst of sufferings which would deprive most other men of all power of thinking or speaking, is as remarkable as his unflinching secrecy--a secrecy which, for the present at least, we cannot hope to penetrate."

I closed the newspaper. Even then, a vague forewarning of what Mannion's inexplicable reserve boded towards me, crossed my mind. There was yet more difficulty, danger, and horror to be faced, than I had hitherto confronted. The slough of degradation and misery into which I had fallen, had its worst perils yet in store for me.

As I became impressed by this conviction, the enervating remembrance of the wickedness to which I had been sacrificed, grew weaker in its influence over me; the bitter tears that I had shed in secret for so many days past, dried sternly at their sources; and I felt the power to endure and to resist coming back to me with my sense of the coming strife. On leaving the library, I ascended again to my own room. In a basket, on my table, lay several unopened letters, which had arrived for me during my illness. There were two which I at once suspected, in hastily turning over the collection, might be all-important in enlightening me on the vile subject of Mannion's female accomplice. The addresses of both these letters were in Mr. Sherwin's handwriting. The first that I opened was dated nearly a month back, and ran thus:

"North Villa, Hollyoake Square.

"DEAR SIR,

"With agonised feelings which no one but a parent, and I will add, an affectionate parent, can possibly form an idea of, I address you on the subject of the act of atrocity committed by that perjured villain, Mannion. You will find that I and my innocent daughter have been, like you, victims of the most devilish deceit that ever was practised on respectable and unsuspecting people.

"Let me ask you, Sir, to imagine the state of my feelings on the night of that most unfortunate party, when I saw my beloved Margaret, instead of coming home quietly as usual, rush into the room in a state bordering on distraction, with a tale the most horrible that ever was addressed to a father's ears. The double-faced villain (I really can't mention his name again) had, I blush to acknowledge, attempted to take advantage of her innocence and confidence--all our innocences and confidences, I may say--but my dear Margaret showed a virtuous courage beyond her years, the natural result of the pious principles and the moral bringing up which I have given her from her cradle. Need I say what was the upshot? Virtue triumphed, as virtue always does, and the villain left her to herself. It was when she was approaching the door-step to fly to the bosom of her home that, I am given to understand, you, by a most remarkable accident, met her. As a man of the world, you will easily conceive what must have been the feelings of a young female, under such peculiar and shocking circumstances. Besides this, your manner, as I am informed, was so terrifying and extraordinary, and my poor Margaret felt so strongly that deceitful appearances might be against her, that she lost all heart, and fled at once, as I said before, to the bosom of her home.

"She is still in a very nervous and unhappy state; she fears that you may be too ready to believe appearances; but I know better. Her explanation will be enough for you, as it was for me. We may have our little differences on minor topics, but we have both the same manly confidence, I am sure--you in your wife, and me in my daughter.

"I called at your worthy father's mansion, to have a fuller explanation with you than I can give here, the morning after this to-all-parties-most-distressing occurrence happened: and was then informed of your serious illness, for which pray accept my best condolences. The next thing I thought of doing was to write to your respected father, requesting a private interview. But on maturer consideration, I thought it perhaps slightly injudicious to take such a step, while you, as the principal party concerned, were ill in bed, and not able to come forward and back me. I was anxious, you will observe, to act for your interests, as well as the interests of my darling girl--of course, knowing at the same time that I had the marriage certificate in my

possession, if needed as a proof, and supposing I was driven to extremities and obliged to take my own course in the matter. But, as I said before, I have a fatherly and friendly confidence in your feeling as convinced of the spotless innocence of my child as I do. So will write no more on this head.

"Having determined, as best under all circumstances, to wait till your illness was over, I have kept my dear Margaret in strict retirement at home (which, as she is your wife, you will acknowledge I had no obligation to do), until you were well enough to come forward and do her justice before her family and yours. I have not omitted to make almost daily inquiries after you, up to the time of penning these lines, and shall continue so to do until your convalescence, which I sincerely hope may be speedily at hand; I am unfortunately obliged to ask that our first interview, when you are able to see me and my daughter, may not take place at North Villa, but at some other place, any you like to fix on. The fact is, my wife, whose wretched health has been a trouble and annoyance to us for years past, has now, I grieve to say, under pressure of this sad misfortune, quite lost her reason. I am sorry to say that she would be capable of interrupting us here, in a most undesirable manner to all parties, and therefore request that our first happy meeting may not take place at my house.

"Trusting that this letter will quite remove all unpleasant feelings from your mind, and that I shall hear from you soon, on your much-to-be-desired recovery,

"I remain, dear Sir,

"Your faithful, obedient servant,

"STEPHEN SHERWIN.

"P. S.--I have not been able to find out where that scoundrel Mannion, has betaken himself to; but if you should know, or suspect, I wish to tell you, as a proof that my indignation at his villany is as great as yours, that I am ready and anxious to pursue him with the utmost rigour of the law, if law can only reach him--paying out of my own pocket all expenses of punishing him and breaking him for the rest of his life, if I go through every court in the country to do it!--S. S."

Hurriedly as I read over this wretched and revolting letter, I detected immediately how the new plot had been framed to keep me still deceived; to

heap wrong after wrong on me with the same impunity. She was not aware that I had followed her into the house, and had heard all from her voice and Mannion's--she believed that I was still ignorant of everything, until we met at the door-step; and in this conviction she had forged the miserable lie which her father's hand had written down. Did he really believe it, or was he writing as her accomplice? It was not worth while to inquire: the worst and darkest discovery which it concerned me to make, had already proclaimed itself--she was a liar and a hypocrite to the very last!

And it was this woman's lightest glance which had once been to me as the star that my life looked to!---it was for this woman that I had practised a deceit on my family which it now revolted me to think of; had braved whatever my father's anger might inflict; had risked cheerfully the loss of all that birth and fortune could bestow! Why had I ever risen from my weary bed of sickness?--it would have been better, far better, that I had died!

But, while life remained, life had its trials and its toils, from which it was useless to shrink. There was still another letter to be opened: there was yet more wickedness which I must know how to confront.

The second of Mr. Sherwin's letters was much shorter than the first, and had apparently been written not more than a day or two back. His tone was changed; he truckled to me no longer--he began to threaten. I was reminded that the servant's report pronounced me to have been convalescent for several days past: and was asked why, under these circumstances, I had never even written. I was warned that my silence had been construed greatly to my disadvantage; and that if it continued longer, the writer would assert his daughter's cause loudly and publicly, not to my father only, but to all the world. The letter ended by according to me three days more of grace, before the fullest disclosure would be made.

For a moment, my indignation got the better of me. I rose, to go that instant to North Villa and unmask the wretches who still thought to make their market of me as easily as ever. But the mere momentary delay caused by opening the door of my room, restored me to myself. I felt that my first duty, my paramount obligation, was to confess all to my father immediately; to know and accept my future position in my own home, before I went out from it to denounce others. I returned to the table, and gathered up the letters scattered on it. My heart beat fast, my head felt confused; but I was resolute in my determination to tell my father, at all hazards, the tale of degradation which I have told in these pages.

I waited in the stillness and loneliness, until it grew nearly dark. The servant

brought in candles. Why could I not ask him whether my father and Clara had come home yet? Was I faltering in my resolution already?

Shortly after this, I heard a step on the stairs and a knock at my door.--My father? No! Clara. I tried to speak to her unconcernedly, when she came in.

"Why, you have been walking till it is quite dark, Clara!"

"We have only been in the garden of the Square--neither papa nor I noticed how late it was. We were talking on a subject of the deepest interest to us both."

She paused a moment, and looked down; then hurriedly came nearer to me, and drew a chair to my side. There was a strange expression of sadness and anxiety in her face, as she continued:

"Can't you imagine what the subject was? It was you, Basil. Papa is coming here directly, to speak to you."

She stopped once more. Her cheeks reddened a little, and she mechanically busied herself in arranging some books that lay on the table. Suddenly, she abandoned this employment; the colour left her face; it was quite pale when she addressed me again, speaking in very altered tones; so altered, that I hardly recognised them as hers.

"You know, Basil, that for a long time past, you have kept some secret from us; and you promised that I should know it first; but I--I have changed my mind; I have no wish to know it, dear: I would rather we never said anything about it." (She coloured, and hesitated a little again, then proceeded quickly and earnestly:) "But I hope you will tell it all to papa: he is coming here to ask you--oh, Basil! be candid with him, and tell him everything; let us all be to one another what we were before this time last year! You have nothing to fear, if you only speak openly; for I have begged him to be gentle and forgiving with you, and you know he refuses me nothing. I only came here to prepare you; to beg you to be candid and patient. Hush! there is a step on the stairs. Speak out, Basil, for my sake--pray, pray, speak out, and then leave the rest to me."

She hurriedly left the room. The next minute, my father entered it.

Perhaps my guilty conscience deceived me, but I thought he looked at me more sadly and severely than I had ever seen him look before. His voice, too, was troubled when he spoke. This was a change, which meant much in him.

"I have come to speak to you," he said, "on a subject about which I had much rather you had spoken to me first."

"I think, Sir, I know to what subject you refer. I--"

"I must beg you will listen to me as patiently as you can," he rejoined; "I have not much to say."

He paused, and sighed heavily. I thought he looked at me more kindly. My heart grew very sad; and I yearned to throw my arms round his neck, to give freedom to the repressed tears which half choked me, to weep out on his bosom my confession that I was no more worthy to be called his son. Oh, that I had obeyed the impulse which moved me to do this!

"Basil," pursued my father, gravely and sadly; "I hope and believe that I have little to reproach myself with in my conduct towards you. I think I am justified in saying, that very few fathers would have acted towards a son as I have acted for the last year or more. I may often have grieved over the secresy which has estranged you from us; I may even have shown you by my manner that I resented it; but I have never used my authority to force you into the explanation of your conduct, which you have been so uniformly unwilling to volunteer. I rested on that implicit faith in the honour and integrity of my son, which I will not yet believe to have been ill-placed, but which, I fear, has led me to neglect too long the duty of inquiry which I owed to your own well-being, and to my position towards you. I am now here to atone for this omission; circumstances have left me no choice. It deeply concerns my interest as a father, and my honour as the head of our family, to know what heavy misfortune it was (I can imagine it to be nothing else) that stretched my son senseless in the open street, and afflicted him afterwards with an illness which threatened his reason and his life. You are now sufficiently recovered to reveal this; and I only use my legitimate authority over my own children, when I tell you that I must now know all. If you persist in remaining silent, the relations between us must henceforth change for life."

"I am ready to make my confession, Sir. I only ask you to believe beforehand, that if I have sinned grievously against you, I have been already heavily punished for the sin. I am afraid it is impossible that your worst forebodings can have prepared you--"

"The words you spoke in your delirium--words which I heard, but will not judge you by--justified the worst forebodings."

"My illness has spared me the hardest part of a hard trial, Sir, if it has prepared you for what I have to confess; if you suspect--"

"I do not suspect--I feel but too sure, that you, my second son, from whom I had expected far better things, have imitated in secret--I am afraid, outstripped--the worst vices of your elder brother."

"My brother!--my brother's faults mine! Ralph!"

"Yes, Ralph. It is my last hope that you will now imitate Ralph's candour. Take example from that best part of him, as you have already taken example from the worst."

My heart grew faint and cold as he spoke. Ralph's example! Ralph's vices!--vices of the reckless hour, or the idle day!--vices whose stain, in the world's eye, was not a stain for life!--convenient, reclaimable vices, that men were mercifully unwilling to associate with grinning infamy and irreparable disgrace! How far--how fearfully far, my father was from the remotest suspicion of what had really happened! I tried to answer his last words, but the apprehension of the life-long humiliation and grief which my confession might inflict on him--absolutely incapable, as he appeared to be, of foreboding even the least degrading part of it--kept me speechless. When he resumed, after a momentary silence, his tones were stern, his looks searching--pitilessly searching, and bent full upon my face.

"A person has been calling, named Sherwin," he said, "and inquiring about you every day. What intimate connection between you authorises this perfect stranger to me to come to the house as frequently as he does, and to make his inquiries with a familiarity of tone and manner which has struck every one of the servants who have, on different occasions, opened the door to him? Who is this Mr. Sherwin?"

"It is not with him, Sir, that I can well begin. I must go back--"

"You must go back farther, I am afraid, than you will be able to return. You must go back to the time when you had nothing to conceal from me, and when you could speak to me with the frankness and directness of a gentleman."

"Pray be patient with me, Sir; give me a few minutes to collect myself. I have much need for a little self-possession before I tell you all."

"All? your tones mean more than your words--they are candid, at least! Have I feared the worst, and yet not feared as I ought? Basil!--do you hear me, Basil? You are trembling very strangely; you are growing pale!"

"I shall be better directly, Sir. I am afraid I am not quite so strong yet as I thought myself. Father! I am heart-broken and spirit-broken: be patient and kind to me, or I cannot speak to you."

I thought I saw his eyes moisten. He shaded them a moment with his hand, and sighed again--the same long, trembling sigh that I had heard before. I tried to rise from my chair, and throw myself on my knees at his feet. He mistook the action, and caught me by the arm, believing that I was fainting.

"No more to-night, Basil," he said, hurriedly, but very gently; "no more on this subject till to-morrow."

"I can speak now, Sir; it is better to speak at once."

"No: you are too much agitated; you are weaker than I thought. To-morrow, in the morning, when you are stronger after a night's rest. No! I will hear nothing more. Go to bed now; I will tell your sister not to disturb you to-night. To-morrow, you shall speak to me; and speak in your own way, without interruption. Good-night, Basil, good-night."

Without waiting to shake hands with me, he hastened to the door, as if anxious to hide from my observation the grief and apprehension which had evidently overcome him. But, just at the moment when he was leaving the room, he hesitated, turned round, looked sorrowfully at me for an instant, and then, retracing his steps, gave me his hand, pressed mine for a moment in silence, and left me.

After the morrow was over, would he ever give me that hand again?

III.

The morning which was to decide all between my father and me, the morning on whose event hung the future of my home life, was the brightest and loveliest that my eyes ever looked on. A cloudless sky, a soft air, sunshine so joyous and dazzling that the commonest objects looked beautiful in its light, seemed to be mocking at me for my heavy heart, as I stood at my window, and thought of the hard duty to be fulfilled, on the harder judgment that might be pronounced, before the dawning of another day.

During the night, I had arranged no plan on which to conduct the terrible disclosure which I was now bound to make--the greatness of the emergency deprived me of all power of preparing myself for it. I thought on my father's character, on the inbred principles of honour which ruled him with the stern influence of a fanaticism: I thought on his pride of caste, so unobtrusive, so rarely hinted at in words, and yet so firmly rooted in his nature, so intricately entwined with every one of his emotions, his aspirations, his simplest feelings and ideas: I thought on his almost feminine delicacy in shrinking from the barest mention of impurities which other men could carelessly discuss, or could laugh over as good material for an after-dinner jest. I thought over all this, and when I remembered that it was to such a man that I must confess the infamous marriage which I had contracted in secret, all hope from his fatherly affection deserted me; all idea of appealing to his chivalrous generosity became a delusion in which it was madness to put a moment's trust.

The faculties of observation are generally sharpened, in proportion as the faculties of reflection are dulled, under the influence of an absorbing suspense. While I now waited alone in my room, the most ordinary sounds and events in the house, which I never remembered noticing before, absolutely enthralled me. It seemed as if the noise of a footstep, the echo of a voice, the shutting or opening of doors down stairs, must, on this momentous day, presage some mysterious calamity, some strange discovery, some secret project formed against me, I knew not how, or by whom. Two or three times I found myself listening intently on the staircase, with what object I could hardly tell. It was always, however, on those occasions, that a dread, significant quiet appeared to have fallen suddenly on the house. Clara never came to me, no message arrived from my father; the door-bell seemed strangely silent, the servants strangely neglectful of their duties above stairs. I caught myself returning to my own room softly, as if I

expected that some hidden catastrophe might break forth, if sound of my footsteps were heard.

Would my father seek me again in my own room, or would he send for me down stairs? It was not long before the doubt was decided. One of the servants knocked at my door--the servant whose special duty it had been to wait on me in my illness. I longed to take the man's hand, and implore his sympathy and encouragement while he addressed me.

"My master, Sir, desires me to say that, if you feel well enough, he wishes to see you in his own room."

I rose, and immediately followed the servant. On our way, we passed the door of Clara's private sitting-room--it opened, and my sister came out and laid her hand on my arm. She smiled as I looked at her; but the tears stood thick in her eyes, and her face was deadly pale.

"Think of what I said last night, Basil," she whispered, "and, if hard words are spoken to you, think of me. All that our mother would have done for you, if she had been still among us, I will do. Remember that, and keep heart and hope to the very last."

She hastily returned to her room, and I went on down stairs. In the hall, the servant was waiting for me, with a letter in his hand.

"This was left for you, Sir, a little while ago. The messenger who brought it said he was not to wait for an answer."

It was no time for reading letters--the interview with my father was too close at hand. I hastily put the letter into my pocket, barely noticing, as I did so, that the handwriting on the address was very irregular, and quite unknown to me.

I went at once into my father's room.

He was sitting at his table, cutting the leaves of some new books that lay on it. Pointing to a chair placed opposite to him, he briefly inquired after my health; and then added, in a lower tone--

"Take any time you like, Basil, to compose and collect yourself. This morning my time is yours."

He turned a little away from me, and went on cutting the leaves of the books

placed before him. Still utterly incapable of preparing myself in any way for the disclosure expected from me; without thought or hope, or feeling of any kind, except a vague sense of thankfulness for the reprieve granted me before I was called on to speak--I mechanically looked round and round the room, as if I expected to see the sentence to be pronounced against me, already written on the walls, or grimly foreshadowed in the faces of the old family portraits which hung above the fireplace.

What man has ever felt that all his thinking powers were absorbed, even by the most poignant mental misery that could occupy them? In moments of imminent danger, the mind can still travel of its own accord over the past, in spite of the present--in moments of bitter affliction, it can still recur to every-day trifles, in spite of ourselves. While I now sat silent in my father's room, long-forgotten associations of childhood connected with different parts of it, began to rise on my memory in the strangest and most startling independence of any influence or control, which my present agitation and suspense might be supposed to exercise over them. The remembrances that should have been the last to be awakened at this time of heavy trial, were the very remembrances which now moved within me.

With burdened heart and aching eyes I looked over the walls around me. There, in that corner, was the red cloth door which led to the library. As children, how often Ralph and I had peeped curiously through that very door, to see what my father was about in his study, to wonder why he had so many letters to write, and so many books to read. How frightened we both were, when he discovered us one day, and reproved us severely! How happy the moment afterwards, when we had begged him to pardon us, and were sent back to the library again with a great picture-book to look at, as a token that we were both forgiven! Then, again, there was the high, old-fashioned, mahogany press before the window, with the same large illustrated folio about Jewish antiquities lying on it, which, years and years ago, Clara and I were sometimes allowed to look at, as a special treat, on Sunday afternoons; and which we always examined and re-examined with never-ending delight--standing together on two chairs to reach up to the thick, yellow-looking leaves, and turn them over with our own hands. And there, in the recess between two bookcases, still stood the ancient desk-table, with its rows of little inlaid drawers; and on the bracket above it the old French clock, which had once belonged to my mother, and which always chimed the hours so sweetly and merrily. It was at that table that Ralph and I always bade my father farewell, when we were going back to school after the holidays, and were receiving our allowance of pocket-money, given to us out of one of the tiny inlaid drawers, just before we started. Near that spot, too, Clara--then a little rosy child--used to wait gravely and anxiously, with

her doll in her arms, to say good-bye for the last time, and to bid us come back soon, and then never go away again. I turned, and looked abruptly towards the window; for such memories as the room suggested were more than I could bear.

Outside, in the dreary strip of garden, the few stunted, dusky trees were now rustling as pleasantly in the air, as if the breeze that stirred them came serenely over an open meadow, or swept freshly under their branches from the rippling surface of a brook. Distant, but yet well within hearing, the mighty murmur from a large thoroughfare--the great mid-day voice of London--swelled grandly and joyously on the ear. While, nearer still, in a street that ran past the side of the house, the notes of an organ rang out shrill and fast; the instrument was playing its liveliest waltz tune--a tune which I had danced to in the ball-room over and over again. What mocking memories within, what mocking sounds without, to herald and accompany such a confession as I had now to make!

Minute after minute glided on, inexorably fast; and yet I never broke silence. My eyes turned anxiously and slowly on my father.

He was still looking away from me, still cutting the leaves of the books before him. Even in that trifling action, the strong emotions which he was trying to conceal, were plainly and terribly betrayed. His hand, usually so steady and careful, trembled perceptibly; and the paper-knife tore through the leaves faster and faster--cutting them awry, rending them one from another, so as to spoil the appearance of every page. I believe he felt that I was looking at him; for he suddenly discontinued his employment, turned round towards me, and spoke--

"I have resolved to give you your own time," he said, "and from that resolve I have no wish to depart--I only ask you to remember that every minute of delay adds to the suffering and suspense which I am enduring on your account." He opened the books before him again, adding in lower and colder tones, as he did so--"In your place, Ralph would have spoken before this."

Ralph, and Ralph's example quoted to me again!--I could remain silent no longer.

"My brother's faults towards you, and towards his family, are not such faults as mine, Sir," I began. "I have not imitated his vices; I have acted as he would not have acted. And yet, the result of my error will appear far more humiliating, and even disgraceful, in your eyes, than the results of any errors of Ralph's."

As I pronounced the word "disgraceful," he suddenly looked me full in the face. His eyes lightened up sternly, and the warning red spot rose on his pale cheeks.

"What do you mean by 'disgraceful?'" he asked abruptly; "what do you mean by associating such a word as disgrace with your conduct--with the conduct of a son of mine?"

"I must reply to your question indirectly, Sir," I continued. "You asked me last night who the Mr. Sherwin was who has called here so often--"

"And this morning I ask it again. I have other questions to put to you, besides--you called constantly on a woman's name in your delirium. But I will repeat last night's question first--who is Mr. Sherwin?"

"He lives--"

"I don't ask where he lives. Who is he? What is he?"

"Mr. Sherwin is a linen-draper--"

"You owe him money?--you have borrowed money of him? Why did you not tell me this before? You have degraded my house by letting a man call at the door--I know it!--in the character of a dun. He has inquired about you as his 'friend,'--the servants told me of it. This money-lending tradesman, your 'friend!' If I had heard that the poorest labourer on my land called you 'friend,' I should have held you honoured by the attachment and gratitude of an honest man. When I hear that name given to you by a tradesman and money-lender, I hold you contaminated by connection with a cheat. You were right, Sir!--this is disgrace; how much do you owe? Where are your dishonoured acceptances? Where have you used my name and my credit? Tell me at once--I insist on it!"

He spoke rapidly and contemptuously, and rising from his chair as he ended, walked impatiently up and down the room.

"I owe no money to Mr. Sherwin, Sir--no money to any one."

He stopped suddenly:

"No money to any one?" he repeated very slowly, and in very altered tones. "You spoke of disgrace just now. There is a worse disgrace then that you

have hidden from me, than debts dishonourably contracted?"

At this moment, a step passed across the hall. He instantly turned round, and locked the door on that side of the room--then continued:

"Speak! and speak honestly if you can. How have you been deceiving me? A woman's name escaped you constantly, when your delirium was at its worst. You used some very strange expressions about her, which it was impossible altogether to comprehend; but you said enough to show that her character was one of the most abandoned; that her licentiousness--it is too revolting to speak of her--I return to you. I insist on knowing how far your vices have compromised you with that vicious woman."

"She has wronged me--cruelly, horribly, wronged me--" I could say no more. My head drooped on my breast; my shame overpowered me.

"Who is she? You called her Margaret, in your illness--who is she?"

"She is Mr. Sherwin's daughter--" The words that I would fain have spoken next, seemed to suffocate me. I was silent again.

I heard him mutter to himself:

"That man's daughter!--a worse bait than the bait of money!"

He bent forward, and looked at me searchingly. A frightful paleness flew over his face in an instant.

"Basil!" he cried, "in God's name, answer me at once! What is Mr. Sherwin's daughter to you?"

"She is my wife!"

I heard no answer--not a word, not even a sigh. My eyes were blinded with tears, my face was bent down; I saw nothing at first. When I raised my head, and dashed away the blinding tears, and looked up, the blood chilled at my heart.

My father was leaning against one of the bookcases, with his hands clasped over his breast. His head was drawn back; his white lips moved, but no sound came from them. Over his upturned face there had passed a ghastly change, as indescribable in its awfulness as the change of death.

I ran horror-stricken to his side, and attempted to take his hand. He started instantly into an erect position, and thrust me from him furiously, without uttering a word. At that fearful moment, in that fearful silence, the sounds out of doors penetrated with harrowing distinctness and merriment into the room. The pleasant rustling of the trees mingled musically with the softened, monotonous rolling of carriages in the distant street, while the organ-tune, now changed to the lively measure of a song, rang out clear and cheerful above both, and poured into the room as lightly and happily as the very sunshine itself.

For a few minutes we stood apart, and neither of us moved or spoke. I saw him take out his handkerchief, and pass it over his face, breathing heavily and thickly, and leaning against the bookcase once more. When he withdrew the handkerchief and looked at me again, I knew that the sharp pang of agony had passed away, that the last hard struggle between his parental affection and his family pride was over, and that the great gulph which was hence-forth to separate father and son, had now opened between us for ever.

He pointed peremptorily to me to go back to my former place, but did not return to his own chair. As I obeyed, I saw him unlock the door of the bookcase against which he had been leaning, and place his hand on one of the books inside. Without withdrawing it from its place, without turning or looking towards me, he asked if I had anything more to say to him.

The chilling calmness of his tones, the question itself, and the time at which he put it, the unnatural repression of a single word of rebuke, of passion, or of sorrow, after such a confession as I had just made, struck me speechless. He turned a little away from the bookcase--still keeping his hand on the book inside--and repeated the question. His eyes, when they met mine, had a pining, weary look, as if they had been long condemned to rest on woeful and revolting objects; his expression had lost its natural refinement, its gentleness of repose, and had assumed a hard, lowering calmness, under which his whole countenance appeared to have shrunk and changed--years of old age seemed to have fallen on it, since I had spoken the last fatal words!

"Have you anything more to say to me?"

On the repetition of that terrible question, I sank down in the chair at my side, and hid my face in my hands. Unconscious how I spoke, or why I spoke; with no hope in myself, or in him; with no motive but to invite and bear the whole penalty of my disgrace, I now disclosed the miserable story of my marriage, and of all that followed it. I remember nothing of the words I

used---nothing of what I urged in my own defence. The sense of bewilderment and oppression grew heavier and heavier on my brain; I spoke more and more rapidly, confusedly, unconsciously, until I was again silenced and recalled to myself by the sound of my father's voice. I believe I had arrived at the last, worst part of my confession, when he interrupted me.

"Spare me any more details," he said, bitterly, "you have humiliated me sufficiently--you have spoken enough."

He removed the book on which his hand had hitherto rested from the case behind him, and advanced with it to the table--paused for a moment, pale and silent--then slowly opened it at the first page, and resumed his chair.

I recognised the book instantly. It was a biographical history of his family, from the time of his earliest ancestors down to the date of the births of his own children. The thick quarto pages were beautifully illuminated in the manner of the ancient manuscripts; and the narrative, in written characters, had been produced under his own inspection. This book had cost him years of research and perseverance. The births and deaths, the marriages and possessions, the battle achievements and private feuds of the old Norman barons from whom he traced his descent, were all enrolled in regular order on every leaf--headed, sometimes merely by representations of the Knight's favourite weapon; sometimes by copies of the Baron's effigy on his tombstone in a foreign land. As the history advanced to later dates, beautiful miniature portraits were inlaid at the top of each leaf; and the illuminations were so managed as to symbolize the remarkable merits or the peculiar tastes of the subject of each biography. Thus, the page devoted to my mother was surrounded by her favourite violets, clustering thickest round the last melancholy lines of writing which told the story of her death.

Slowly and in silence, my father turned over the leaves of the book which, next to the Bible, I believe he most reverenced in the world, until he came to the last-written page but one--the page which I knew, from its position, to be occupied by my name. At the top, a miniature portrait of me, when a child, was let into the leaf. Under it, was the record of my birth and names, of the School and College at which I had been taught, and of the profession that I had adopted. Below, a large blank space was left for the entry of future particulars. On this page my father now looked, still not uttering a word, still with the same ghastly calmness on his face. The organ-notes sounded no more; but the trees rustled as pleasantly, and the roar of the distant carriages swelled as joyously as ever on the ear. Some children had come out to play in the garden of a neighbouring house. As their voices reached

us, so fresh, and clear, and happy--but another modulation of the thanksgiving song to God which the trees were singing in the summer air--I saw my father, while he still looked on the page before him, clasp his trembling hands over my portrait so as to hide it from sight.

Then he spoke; but without looking up, and more as if he were speaking to himself than to me. His voice, at other times clear and gentle in its tones, was now so hard and harsh in its forced calmness and deliberation of utterance, that it sounded like a stranger's.

"I came here, this morning," he began, "prepared to hear of faults and misfortunes which should pain me to the heart; which I might never, perhaps, be able to forget, however willing and even predetermined to forgive. But I did not come prepared to hear, that unutterable disgrace had been cast on me and mine, by my own child. I have no words of rebuke or of condemnation for this: the reproach and the punishment have fallen already where the guilt was--and not there only. My son's infamy defiles his brother's birthright, and puts his father to shame. Even his sister's name--"

He stopped, shuddering. When he proceeded, his voice faltered, and his head drooped low.

"I say it again:--you are below all reproach and all condemnation; but I have a duty to perform towards my two who are absent, and I have a last word to say to you when that duty is done. On this page--" (as he pointed to the family history, his tones strengthened again)--"on this page there is a blank space left, after the last entry, for writing the future events of your life. Here, then, if I still acknowledge you to be my son; if I think your presence and the presence of my daughter possible in the same house, must be written such a record of dishonour and degradation as has never yet defiled a single page of this book--here, the foul stain of your marriage, and its consequences, must be admitted to spread over all that is pure before it, and to taint to the last whatever comes after. This shall not be. I have no faith or hope in you more. I know you now, only as an enemy to me and to my house--it is mockery and hypocrisy to call you son; it is an insult to Clara, and even to Ralph, to think of you as my child. In this record your place is destroyed--and destroyed for ever. Would to God I could tear the past from my memory, as I tear the leaf from this book!"

As he spoke, the hour struck; and the old French clock rang out gaily the same little silvery chime which my mother had so often taken me into her room to listen to, in the bygone time. The shrill, lively peal mingled awfully with the sharp, tearing sound, as my father rent out from the book before

him the whole of the leaf which contained my name; tore it into fragments, and cast them on the floor.

He rose abruptly, after he had closed the book again. His cheeks flushed once more; and when he next spoke, his voice grew louder and louder with every word he uttered. It seemed as if he still distrusted his resolution to abandon me; and sought, in his anger, the strength of purpose which, in his calmer mood, he might even yet have been unable to command.

"Now, Sir," he said, "we treat together as strangers. You are Mr. Sherwin's son--not mine. You are the husband of his daughter--not a relation of my family. Rise, as I do: we sit together no longer in the same room. Write!" (he pushed pen, ink, and paper before me,) "write your terms there--I shall find means to keep you to a written engagement--the terms of your absence, for life, from this country; and of hers: the terms of your silence, and of the silence of your accomplices; of all of them. Write what you please; I am ready to pay dearly for your absence, your secrecy, and your abandonment of the name you have degraded. My God! that I should live to bargain for hushing up the dishonour of my family, and to bargain for it with you."

I had listened to him hitherto without pleading a word in my own behalf; but his last speech roused me. Some of his pride stirred in my heart against the bitterness of his contempt. I raised my head, and met his eye steadily for the first time--then, thrust the writing materials away from me, and left my place at the table.

"Stop!" he cried. "Do you pretend that you have not understood me?"

"It is because I have understood you, Sir, that I go. I have deserved your anger, and have submitted without a murmur to all that it could inflict. If you see in my conduct towards you no mitigation of my offence; if you cannot view the shame and wrong inflicted on me, with such grief as may have some pity mixed with it--I have, I think, the right to ask that your contempt may be silent, and your last words to me, not words of insult."

"Insult! After what has happened, is it for you to utter that word in the tone in which you have just spoken it? I tell you again, I insist on your written engagement as I would insist on the engagement of a stranger--I will have it, before you leave this room!"

"All, and more than all, which that degrading engagement could imply, I will do. But I have not fallen so low yet, as to be bribed to perform a duty. You may be able to forget that you are my father; I can never forget that I am

your son."

"The remembrance will avail you nothing as long as I live. I tell you again, I insist on your written engagement, though it were only to show that I have ceased to believe in your word. Write at once--do you hear me?--Write!"

I neither moved nor answered. His face changed again, and grew livid; his fingers trembled convulsively, and crumpled the sheet of paper, as he tried to take it up from the table on which it lay.

"You refuse?" he said quickly.

"I have already told you, Sir--"

"Go!" he interrupted, pointing passionately to the door, "go out from this house, never to return to it again--go, not as a stranger to me, but as an enemy! I have no faith in a single promise you have made: there is no baseness which I do not believe you will yet be guilty of. But I tell you, and the wretches with whom you are leagued, to take warning: I have wealth, power, and position; and there is no use to which I will not put them against the man or woman who threatens the fair fame of this family. Leave me, remembering that--and leave me for ever!"

Just as he uttered the last word, just as my hand was on the lock of the door, a faint sound--something between breathing and speaking--was audible in the direction of the library. He started, and looked round. Impelled, I know not how, I paused on the point of going out. My eyes followed his, and fixed on the cloth door which led into the library.

It opened a little--then shut again--then opened wide. Slowly and noiselessly, Clara came into the room.

The silence and suddenness of her entrance at such a moment; the look of terror which changed to unnatural vacancy the wonted softness and gentleness of her eyes, her pale face, her white dress, and slow, noiseless step, made her first appearance in the room seem almost supernatural; it was as if an apparition had been walking towards us, and not Clara herself! As she approached my father, he pronounced her name in astonishment; but his voice sank to a whisper, while he spoke it. For an instant, she paused, hesitating--I saw her tremble as her eyes met his--then, as they turned towards me, the brave girl came on; and, taking my hand, stood and faced my father, standing by my side.

"Clara!" he exclaimed again, still in the same whispering tones.

I felt her cold hand close fast on mine; the grasp of the chill, frail fingers was almost painful to me. Her lips moved, but her quick, hysterical breathing made the few words she uttered inarticulate.

"Clara!" repeated my father, for the third time, his voice rising, but sinking again immediately--when he spoke his next words, "Clara," he resumed, sadly and gently, "let go his hand; this is not a time for your presence, I beg you to leave us. You must not take his hand! He has ceased to be my son, or your brother. Clara, do you not hear me?"

"Yes, Sir, I hear you," she answered. "God grant that my mother in heaven may not hear you too!"

He was approaching while she replied; but at her last words, he stopped instantly, and turned his face away from us. Who shall say what remembrances of other days shook him to the heart?

"You have spoken, Clara, as you should not have spoken," he went on, without looking up. "Your mother--" his voice faltered and failed him. "Can you still hold his hand after what I have said? I tell you again, he is unworthy to be in your presence; my house is his home no longer--must I command you to leave him?"

The deeply planted instinct of gentleness and obedience prevailed; she dropped my hand, but did not move away from me, even yet.

"Now leave us, Clara," he said. "You were wrong, my love, to be in that room, and wrong to come in here. I will speak to you up-stairs--you must remain here no longer."

She clasped her trembling fingers together, and sighed heavily.

"I cannot go, Sir," she said quickly and breathlessly.

"Must I tell you for the first time in your life, that you are acting disobediently?" he asked.

"I cannot go," she repeated in the same manner, "till you have said you will let him atone for his offence, and will forgive him."

"For his offence there is neither atonement nor forgiveness. Clara! are you so

changed, that you can disobey me to my face?"

He walked away from us as he said this.

"Oh, no! no!" She ran towards him; but stopped halfway, and looked back at me affrightedly, as I stood near the door. "Basil," she cried, "you have not done what you promised me; you have not been patient. Oh, Sir, if I have ever deserved kindness from you, be kind to him for my sake! Basil! speak, Basil! Ask his pardon on your knees. Father, I promised him he should be forgiven, if I asked you. Not a word; not a word from either? Basil! you are not going yet--not going at all! Remember, Sir, how good and kind he has always been to me. My poor mother, (I must speak of her), my poor mother's favourite son--you have told me so yourself! and he has always been my favourite brother; I think because my mother loved him so! His first fault, too! his first grief! And will you tell him for this, that our home is his home no longer? Punish me, Sir! I have done wrong like him; when I heard your voices so loud, I listened in the library. He's going! No, no, no! not yet!"

She ran to the door as I opened it, and pushed it to again. Overwhelmed by the violence of her agitation, my father had sunk into a chair while she was speaking.

"Come back--come back with me to his knees!" she whispered, fixing her wild, tearless eyes on mine, flinging her arms round my neck, and trying to lead me with her from the door. "Come back, or you will drive me mad!" she repeated loudly, drawing me away towards my father.

He rose instantly from his chair.

"Clara," he said, "I command you, leave him!" He advanced a few steps towards me. "Go!" he cried; "if you are human in your villany, you will release me from this!"

I whispered in her ear, "I will write, love--I will write," and disengaged her arms from my neck--they were hanging round it weakly, already! As I passed the door, I turned back, and looked again into the room for the last time.

Clara was in my father's arms, her head lay on his shoulder, her face was as still in its heavenly calmness as if the world and the world's looks knew it no more, and the only light that fell on it now, was light from the angel's eyes. She had fainted.

He was standing with one arm round her, his disengaged hand was

searching impatiently over the wall behind him for the bell, and his eyes were fixed in anguish and in love unutterable on the peaceful face, hushed in its sad repose so close beneath his own. For one moment, I saw him thus, ere I closed the door--the next, I had left the house.

I never entered it again--I have never seen my father since.

IV.

We are seldom able to discover under any ordinary conditions of self-knowledge, how intimately that spiritual part of us, which is undying, can attach to itself and its operations the poorest objects of that external world around us, which is perishable. In the ravelled skein, the slightest threads are the hardest to follow. In analysing the associations and sympathies which regulate the play of our passions, the simplest and homeliest are the last that we detect. It is only when the shock comes, and the mind recoils before it--when joy is changed into sorrow, or sorrow into joy--that we really discern what trifles in the outer world our noblest mental pleasures, or our severest mental pains, have made part of themselves; atoms which the whirlpool has drawn into its vortex, as greedily and as surely as the largest mass.

It was reserved for me to know this, when--after a moment's pause before the door of my father's house, more homeless, then, than the poorest wretch who passed me on the pavement, and had wife or kindred to shelter him in a garret that night--my steps turned, as of old, in the direction of North Villa.

Again I passed over the scene of my daily pilgrimage, always to the same shrine, for a whole year; and now, for the first time, I knew that there was hardly a spot along the entire way, which my heart had not unconsciously made beautiful and beloved to me by some association with Margaret Sherwin. Here was the friendly, familiar shop-window, filled with the glittering trinkets which had so often lured me in to buy presents for her, on my way to the house. There was the noisy street corner, void of all adornment in itself, but once bright to me with the fairy-land architecture of a dream, because I knew that at that place I had passed over half the distance which separated my home from hers. Farther on, the Park trees came in sight--trees that no autumn decay or winter nakedness could make dreary, in the bygone time; for she and I had walked under them together. And further yet, was the turning which led from the long, suburban road into Hollyoake Square--the lonely, dust-whitened place, around which my past happiness and my wasted hopes had flung their golden illusions, like jewels hung round the coarse wooden image of a Roman saint. Dishonoured and ruined, it was among such associations as these--too homely to have been recognised by me in former times--that I journeyed along the well-remembered way to North Villa.

I went on without hesitating, without even a thought of turning back. I had said that the honour of my family should not suffer by the calamity which had fallen on me; and, while life remained, I was determined that nothing should prevent me from holding to my word. It was from this resolution that I drew the faith in myself, the confidence in my endurance, the sustaining calmness under my father's sentence of exclusion, which nerved me to go on. I must inevitably see Mr. Sherwin (perhaps even suffer the humiliation of seeing her!)--must inevitably speak such words, disclose such truths, as should show him that deceit was henceforth useless. I must do this and more, I must be prepared to guard the family to which--though banished from it--I still belonged, from every conspiracy against them that detected crime or shameless cupidity could form, whether in the desire of revenge, or in the hope of gain.. A hard, almost an impossible task--but, nevertheless, a task that must be done!

I kept the thought of this necessity before my mind unceasingly; not only as a duty, but as a refuge from another thought, to which I dared not for a moment turn. The still, pale face which I had seen lying hushed on my father's breast--CLARA!--That way, lay the grief that weakens, the yearning and the terror that are near despair; that way was not it for me.

The servant was at the garden-gate of North Villa--the same servant whom I had seen and questioned in the first days of my fatal delusion. She was receiving a letter from a man, very poorly dressed, who walked away the moment I approached. Her confusion and surprise were so great as she let me in, that she could hardly look at, or speak to me. It was only when I was ascending the door-steps that she said--

"Miss Margaret"--(she still gave her that name!)--"Miss Margaret is upstairs, Sir. I suppose you would like--"

"I have no wish to see her: I want to speak to Mr. Sherwin."

Looking more bewildered, and even frightened, than before, the girl hurriedly opened one of the doors in the passage. I saw, as I entered, that she had shown me, in her confusion, into the wrong room. Mr. Sherwin, who was in the apartment, hastily drew a screen across the lower end of it, apparently to hide something from me; which, however, I had not seen as I came in.

He advanced, holding out his hand; but his restless eyes wandered unsteadily, looking away from me towards the screen.

"So you have come at last, have you? Just let's step into the drawing-room: the fact is--I thought I wrote to you about it--?"

He stopped suddenly, and his outstretched arm fell to his side. I had not said a word. Something in my look and manner must have told him already on what errand I had come.

"Why don't you speak?" he said, after a moment's pause. "What are you looking at me like that for? Stop! Let's say our say in the other room." He walked past me towards the door, and half opened it.

Why was he so anxious to get me away? Who, or what, was he hiding behind the screen? The servant had said his daughter was upstairs; remembering this, and suspecting every action or word that came from him, I determined to remain in the room, and discover his secret. It was evidently connected with me.

"Now then," he continued, opening the door a little wider, "it's only across the hall, you know; and I always receive visitors in the best room."

"I have been admitted here," I replied, "and have neither time nor inclination to follow you from room to room, just as you like. What I have to say is not much; and, unless you give me fit reasons to the contrary, I shall say it here."

"You will, will you? Let me tell you that's damned like what we plain mercantile men call downright incivility. I say it again--incivility; and rudeness too, if you like it better." He saw I was determined, and closed the door as he spoke, his face twitching and working violently, and his quick, evil eyes turned again in the direction of the screen.

"Well," he continued, with a sulky defiance of manner and look, "do as you like; stop here--you'll wish you hadn't before long, I'll be bound! You don't seem to hurry yourself much about speaking, so I shall sit down. You can do as you please. Now then! just let's cut it short--do you come here in a friendly way, to ask me to send for my girl downstairs, and to show yourself the gentleman, or do you not?"

"You have written me two letters, Mr. Sherwin--"

"Yes: and took devilish good care you should get them--I left them myself."

"In writing those letters, you were either grossly deceived; and, in that case,

are only to be pitied, or--"

"Pitied! what the devil do you mean by that? Nobody wants your pity here."

"Or you have been trying to deceive me; and in that case, I have to tell you that deceit is henceforth useless. I know all--more than you suspect: more, I believe, than you would wish me to have known."

"Oh, that's your tack, is it? By God, I expected as much the moment you came in! What! you don't believe my girl--don't you? You're going to fight shy, and behave like a scamp--are you? Damn your infernal coolness and your aristocratic airs and graces! You shall see I'll be even with you--you shall. Ha! ha! look here!--here's the marriage certificate safe in my pocket. You won't do the honourable by my poor child--won't you? Come out! Come away! You'd better--I'm off to your father to blow the whole business; I am, as sure as my name's Sherwin!"

He struck his fist on the table, and started up, livid with passion. The screen trembled a little, and a slight rustling noise was audible behind it, just as he advanced towards me. He stopped instantly, with an oath, and looked back.

"I warn you to remain here," I said. "This morning, my father has heard all from my lips. He has renounced me as his son, and I have left his house for ever."

He turned round quickly, staring at me with a face of mingled fury and dismay.

"Then you come to me a beggar!" he burst out; "a beggar who has taken me in about his fine family, and his fine prospects; a beggar who can't support my child--Yes! I say it again, a beggar who looks me in the face, and talks as you do. I don't care a damn about you or your father! I know my rights; I'm an Englishman, thank God! I know my rights, and my Margaret's rights; and I'll have them in spite of you both. Yes! you may stare as angry as you like; staring don't hurt. I'm an honest man, and my girl's an honest girl!"

I was looking at him, at that moment, with the contempt that I really felt; his rage produced no other sensation in me. All higher and quicker emotions seemed to have been dried at their sources by the events of the morning.

"I say my girl's an honest girl," he repeated, sitting down again; "and I dare you, or anybody--I don't care who--to prove the contrary. You told me you knew all, just now. What all? Come! we'll have this out before we do

anything else. She says she's innocent, and I say she's innocent: and if I could find out that damnation scoundrel Mannion, and get him here, I'd make him say it too. Now, after all that, what have you got against her?--against your lawful wife; and I'll make you own her as such, and keep her as such, I can promise you!"

"I am not here to ask questions, or to answer them," I replied--"my errand in this house is simply to tell you, that the miserable falsehoods contained in your letter, will avail you as little as the foul insolence of language by which you are now endeavouring to support them. I told you before, and I now tell you again, I know all. I had been inside that house, before I saw your daughter at the door; and had heard, from her voice and his voice, what such shame and misery as you cannot comprehend forbid me to repeat. To your past duplicity, and to your present violence, I have but one answer to give:--I will never see your daughter again."

"But you shall see her again--yes! and keep her too! Do you think I can't see through you and your precious story? Your father's cut you off with a shilling; and now you want to curry favour with him again by trumping up a case against my girl, and trying to get her off your hands that way. But it won't do! You've married her, my fine gentleman, and you shall stick to her! Do you think I wouldn't sooner believe her, than believe you? Do you think I'll stand this? Here she is up-stairs, half heart-broken, on my hands; here's my wife"--(his voice sank suddenly as he said this)--"with her mind in such a state that I'm kept away from business, day after day, to look after her; here's all this crying and misery and mad goings-on in my house, because you choose to behave like a scamp--and do you think I'll put up with it quietly? I'll make you do your duty to my girl, if she goes to the parish to appeal against you! Your story indeed! Who'll believe that a young female, like Margaret, could have taken to a fellow like Mannion? and kept it all a secret from you? Who believes that, I should like to know?"

"I believe it!"

The third voice which pronounced those words was Mrs. Sherwin's.

But was the figure that now came out from behind the screen, the same frail, shrinking figure which had so often moved my pity in the past time? the same wan figure of sickness and sorrow, ever watching in the background of the fatal love-scenes at North Villa; ever looking like the same spectre-shadow, when the evenings darkened in as I sat by Margaret's side?

Had the grave given up its dead? I stood awe-struck, neither speaking nor

moving while she walked towards me. She was clothed in the white garments of the sick-room--they looked on her like the raiment of the tomb. Her figure, which I only remembered as drooping with premature infirmity, was now straightened convulsively to its proper height; her arms hung close at her side, like the arms of a corpse; the natural paleness of her face had turned to an earthy hue; its natural expression, so meek, so patient, so melancholy in uncomplaining sadness, was gone; and, in its stead, was left a pining stillness that never changed; a weary repose of lifeless waking--the awful seal of Death stamped ghastly on the living face; the awful look of Death staring out from the chill, shining eyes.

Her husband kept his place, and spoke to her as she stopped opposite to me. His tones were altered, but his manner showed as little feeling as ever.

"There now!" he began, "you said you were sure he'd come here, and that you'd never take to your bed, as the Doctor wanted you, till you'd seen him and spoken to him. Well, he has come; there he is. He came in while you were asleep, I rather think; and I let him stop, so that if you woke up and wanted to see him, you might. You can't say--nobody can say--I haven't given in to your whims and fancies after that. There! you've had your way, and you've said you believe him; and now, if I ring for the nurse, you'll go upstairs at last, and make no more worry about it--Eh?"

She moved her head slowly, and looked at him. As those dying eyes met his, as that face on which the light of life was darkening fast, turned on him, even his gross nature felt the shock. I saw him shrink--his sallow cheeks whitened, he moved his chair away, and said no more.

She looked back to me again, and spoke. Her voice was still the same soft, low voice as ever. It was fearful to hear how little it had altered, and then to look on the changed face.

"I am dying," she said to me. "Many nights have passed since that night when Margaret came home by herself and I felt something moving down into my heart, when I looked at her, which I knew was death--many nights, since I have been used to say my prayers, and think I had said them for the last time, before I dared shut my eyes in the darkness and the quiet. I have lived on till to-day, very weary of my life ever since that night when Margaret came in; and yet, I could not die, because I had an atonement to make to you, and you never came to hear it and forgive me. I was not fit for God to take me till you came--I know that, know it to be truth from a dream."

She paused, still looking at me, but with the same deathly blank of

expression. The eye had ceased to speak already; nothing but the voice was left.

"My husband has asked, who will believe you?" she went on; her weak tones gathering strength with every fresh word she uttered. "I have answered that I will; for you have spoken the truth. Now, when the light of this world is fading from my eyes; here, in this earthly home of much sorrow and suffering, which I must soon quit--in the presence of my husband--under the same roof with my sinful child--I bear you witness that you have spoken the truth. I, her mother, say it of her: Margaret Sherwin is guilty; she is no more worthy to be called your wife."

She pronounced the last words slowly, distinctly, solemnly. Till that fearful denunciation was spoken, her husband had been looking sullenly and suspiciously towards us, as we stood together; but while she uttered it, his eyes fell, and he turned away his head in silence.

He never looked up, never moved, or interrupted her, as she continued, still addressing me; but now speaking very slowly and painfully, pausing longer and longer between every sentence.

"From this room I go to my death-bed. The last words I speak in this world shall be to my husband, and shall change his heart towards you. I have been weak of purpose," (as she said this, a strange sweetness and mournfulness began to steal over her tones,) "miserably, guiltily weak, all my life. Much sorrow and pain and heavy disappointment, when I was young, did some great harm to me which I have never recovered since. I have lived always in fear of others, and doubt of myself; and this has made me guilty of a great sin towards you. Forgive me before I die! I suspected the guilt that was preparing--I foreboded the shame that was to come--they hid it from others' eyes; but, from the first, they could not hide it from mine--and yet I never warned you as I ought! That man had the power of Satan over me! I always shuddered before him, as I used to shudder at the darkness when I was a little child! My life has been all fear--fear of him; fear of my husband, and even of my daughter; fear, worse still, of my own thoughts, and of what I had discovered that should be told to you. When I tried to speak, you were too generous to understand me--I was afraid to think my suspicions were right, long after they should have been suspicions no longer. It was misery!--oh, what misery from then till now!"

Her voice died away for a moment, in faint, breathless murmurings. She struggled to recover it, and repeated in a whisper:

"Forgive me before I die! I have made a terrible atonement; I have borne witness against the innocence of my own child. My own child! I dare not bid God bless her, if they bring her to my bedside!--forgive me!--forgive me before I die!"

She took my hand, and pressed it to her cold lips. The tears gushed into my eyes, as I tried to speak to her.

"No tears for me!" she murmured gently. "Basil!--let me call you as your mother would call you if she was alive--Basil! pray that I may be forgiven in the dreadful Eternity to which I go, as you have forgiven me! And, for her?--oh! who will pray for her when I am gone?"

Those words were the last I heard her pronounce. Exhausted beyond the power of speaking more, though it were only in a whisper, she tried to take my hand again, and express by a gesture the irrevocable farewell. But her strength failed her even for this--failed her with awful suddenness. Her hand moved halfway towards mine; then stopped, and trembled for a moment in the air; then fell to her side, with the fingers distorted and clenched together. She reeled where she stood, and sank helplessly as I stretched out my arms to support her.

Her husband rose fretfully from his chair, and took her from me. When his eyes met mine, the look of sullen self-restraint in his countenance was crossed, in an instant, by an expression of triumphant malignity. He whispered to me: "If you don't change your tone by to-morrow!"--paused--and then, without finishing the sentence, moved away abruptly, and supported his wife to the door.

Just when her face was turned towards where I stood, as he took her out, I thought I saw the cold, vacant eyes soften as they rested on me, and change again tenderly to the old look of patience and sadness which I remembered so well. Was my imagination misleading me? or had the light of that meek spirit shone out on earth, for the last time at parting, in token of farewell to mine? She was gone to me, gone for ever--before I could look nearer, and know.

* * * * *

I was told, afterwards, how she died.

For the rest of that day, and throughout the night, she lay speechless, but still alive. The next morning, the faint pulse still fluttered. As the day wore

on, the doctors applied fresh stimulants, and watched her in astonishment; for they had predicted her death as impending every moment, at least twelve hours before. When they spoke of this to her husband, his behaviour was noticed as very altered and unaccountable by every one. He sulkily refused to believe that her life was in danger; he roughly accused anybody who spoke of her death, as wanting to fix on him the imputation of having ill-used her, and so being the cause of her illness; and more than this, he angrily vindicated himself to every one about her--even to the servants--by quoting the indulgence he had shown to her fancy for seeing me when I called, and his patience while she was (as he termed it) wandering in her mind in trying to talk to me. The doctors, suspecting how his uneasy conscience was accusing him, forbore in disgust all expostulation. Except when he was in his daughter's room, he was shunned by everybody in the house.

Just before noon, on the second day, Mrs. Sherwin rallied a little under the stimulants administered to her, and asked to see her husband alone. Both her words and manner gave the lie to his assertion that her faculties were impaired--it was observed by all her attendants, that whenever she had strength to speak, her speech never wandered in the slightest degree. Her husband quitted her room more fretfully uneasy, more sullenly suspicious of the words and looks of those about him than ever--went instantly to seek his daughter--and sent her in alone to her mother's bedside. In a few minutes, she hurriedly came out again, pale, and violently agitated; and was heard to say, that she had been spoken to so unnaturally, and so shockingly, that she could not, and would not, enter that room again until her mother was better. Better! the father and daughter were both agreed in that; both agreed that she was not dying, but only out of her mind.

During the afternoon, the doctors ordered that Mrs. Sherwin should not be allowed to see her husband or her child again, without their permission. There was little need of taking such a precaution to preserve the tranquillity of her last moments. As the day began to decline, she sank again into insensibility: her life was just not death, and that was all. She lingered on in this quiet way, with her eyes peacefully closed, and her breathing so gentle as to be quite inaudible, until late in the evening. Just as it grew quite dark, and the candle was lit in the sick room, the servant who was helping to watch by her, drew aside the curtain to look at her mistress; and saw that, though her eyes were still closed, she was smiling. The girl turned round, and beckoned to the nurse to come to the bedside. When they lifted the curtains again to look at her, she was dead.

* * * * *

Let me return to the day of my last visit to North Villa. More remains to be recorded, before my narrative can advance to the morrow.

After the door had closed, and I knew that I had looked my last on Mrs. Sherwin in this world, I remained a few minutes alone in the room, until I had steadied my mind sufficiently to go out again into the streets. As I walked down the garden-path to the gate, the servant whom I had seen on my entrance, ran after me, and eagerly entreated that I would wait one moment and speak to her.

When I stopped and looked at the girl, she burst into tears. "I'm afraid I've been doing wrong, Sir," she sobbed out, "and at this dreadful time too, when my poor mistress is dying! If you please, Sir, I must tell you about it!"

I gave her a little time to compose herself; and then asked what she had to say.

"I think you must have seen a man leaving a letter with me, Sir," she continued, "just when you came up to the door, a little while ago?"

"Yes: I saw him."

"It was for Miss Margaret, Sir, that letter; and I was to keep it secret; and--and--it isn't the first I've taken in for her. It's weeks and weeks ago, Sir, that the same man came with a letter, and gave me money to let nobody see it but Miss Margaret--and that time, Sir, he waited; and she sent me with an answer to give him, in the same secret way. And now, here's this second letter; I don't know who it comes from--but I haven't taken it to her yet; I waited to show it to you, Sir, as you came out, because--"

"Why, Susan?--tell me candidly why?"

"I hope you won't take it amiss, Sir, if I say that having lived in the family so long as I have, I can't help knowing a little about what you and Miss Margaret used to be to each other, and that something's happened wrong between you lately; and so, Sir, it seems to be very bad and dishonest in me (after first helping you to come together, as I did), to be giving her strange letters, unknown to you. They may be bad letters. I'm sure I wouldn't wish to say anything disrespectful, or that didn't become my place; but--"

"Go on, Susan--speak as freely and as truly to me as ever."

"Well, Sir, Miss Margaret's been very much altered, ever since that night when she came home alone, and frightened us so. She shuts herself up in her room, and won't speak to anybody except my master; she doesn't seem to care about anything that happens; and sometimes she looks so at me, when I'm waiting on her, that I'm almost afraid to be in the same room with her. I've never heard her mention your name once, Sir; and I'm fearful there's something on her mind that there oughtn't to be. He's a very shabby man that leaves the letters--would you please to look at this, and say whether you think it's right in me to take it up-stairs."

She held out a letter. I hesitated before I looked at it.

"Oh, Sir! please, please do take it!" said the girl earnestly. "I did wrong, I'm afraid, in giving her the first; but I can't do wrong again, when my poor mistress is dying in the house. I can't keep secrets, Sir, that may be bad secrets, at such a dreadful time as this; I couldn't have laid down in my bed to-night, when there's likely to be death in the house, if I hadn't confessed what I've done; and my poor mistress has always been so kind and good to us servants--better than ever we deserved."

Weeping bitterly as she said this, the kind-hearted girl held out the letter to me once more. This time I took it from her, and looked at the address.

Though I did not know the handwriting, still there was something in those unsteady characters which seemed familiar to me. Was it possible that I had ever seen them before? I tried to consider; but my memory was confused, my mind wearied out, after all that had happened since the morning. The effort was fruitless: I gave back the letter.

"I know as little about it, Susan, as you do."

"But ought I to take it up-stairs, Sir? only tell me that!"

"It is not for me to say. All interest or share on my part, Susan, in what she--in what your young mistress receives, is at an end."

"I'm very sorry to hear you say that, Sir; very, very sorry. But what would you advise me to do?"

"Let me look at the letter once more."

On a second view, the handwriting produced the same effect on me as before, ending too with just the same result. I returned the letter again.

"I respect your scruples, Susan, but I am not the person to remove or to justify them. Why should you not apply in this difficulty to your master?"

"I dare not, Sir; I dare not for my life. He's been worse than ever, lately; if I said as much to him as I've said to you, I believe he'd kill me!" She hesitated, then continued more composedly; "Well, at any rate I've told you, Sir, and that's made my mind easier; and--and I'll give her the letter this once, and then take in no more--if they come, unless I hear a proper account of them."

She curtseyed; and, bidding me farewell very sadly and anxiously, returned to the house with the letter in her hand. If I had guessed at that moment who it was written by! If I could only have suspected what were its contents!

I left Hollyoake Square in a direction which led to some fields a little distance on. It was very strange; but that unknown handwriting still occupied my thoughts: that wretched trifle absolutely took possession of my mind, at such a time as this; in such a position as mine was now.

I stopped wearily in the fields at a lonely spot, away from the footpath. My eyes ached at the sunlight, and I shaded them with my hand. Exactly at the same instant, the lost recollection flashed back on me so vividly that I started almost in terror. The handwriting shown me by the servant at North Villa, was the same as the handwriting on that unopened and forgotten letter in my pocket, which I had received from the servant at home--received in the morning, as I crossed the hall to enter my father's room.

I took out the letter, opened it with trembling fingers, and looked through the cramped, closely-written pages for the signature.

It was "ROBERT MANNION."

V.

Mannion! I had never suspected that the note shown to me at North Villa might have come from him. And yet, the secrecy with which it had been delivered; the person to whom it was addressed; the mystery connected with it even in the servant's eyes, all pointed to the discovery which I had so incomprehensibly failed to make. I had suffered a letter, which might contain written proof of her guilt, to be taken, from under my own eyes, to Margaret Sherwin! How had my perceptions become thus strangely blinded? The confusion of my memory, the listless incapacity of all my faculties, answered the question but too readily, of themselves.

"Robert Mannion!" I could not take my eyes from that name: I still held before me the crowded, closely-written lines of his writing, and delayed to read them. Something of the horror which the presence of the man himself would have inspired in me, was produced by the mere sight of his letter, and that letter addressed to me. The vengeance which my own hands had wreaked on him, he was, of all men the surest to repay. Perhaps, in these lines, the dark future through which his way and mine might lie, would be already shadowed forth. Margaret too! Could he write so much, and not write of her? not disclose the mystery in which the motives of her crime were still hidden? I turned back again to the first page, and resolved to read the letter. It began abruptly, in the following terms:--

"St. Helen's Hospital.

"You may look at the signature when you receive this, and may be tempted to tear up my letter, and throw it from you unread. I warn you to read what I have written, and to estimate, if you can, its importance to yourself. Destroy these pages afterwards if you like--they will have served their purpose.

"Do you know where I am, and what I suffer? I am one of the patients of this hospital, hideously mutilated for life by your hand. If I could have known certainly the day of my dismissal, I should have waited to tell you with my own lips what I now write--but I am ignorant of this. At the very point of recovery I have suffered a relapse.

"You will silence any uneasy upbraidings of conscience, should you feel them, by saying that I have deserved death at your hands. I will tell you, in

answer, what you deserve and shall receive at mine.

"But I will first assume that it was knowledge of your wife's guilt which prompted your attack on me. I am well aware that she has declared herself innocent, and that her father supports her declaration. By the time you receive this letter (my injuries oblige me to allow myself a whole fortnight to write it in), I shall have taken measures which render further concealment unnecessary. Therefore, if my confession avail you aught, you have it here:--She is guilty: willingly guilty, remember, whatever she may say to the contrary. You may believe this, and believe all I write hereafter. Deception between us two is at an end.

"I have told you Margaret Sherwin is guilty. Why was she guilty? What was the secret of my influence over her?

"To make you comprehend what I have now to communicate, it is necessary for me to speak of myself; and of my early life. To-morrow, I will undertake this disclosure--to-day, I can neither hold the pen, nor see the paper any longer. If you could look at my face, where I am now laid, you would know why!"

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"When we met for the first time at North Villa, I had not been five minutes in your presence before I detected your curiosity to know something about me, and perceived that you doubted, from the first, whether I was born and bred for such a situation as I held under Mr. Sherwin. Failing--as I knew you would fail--to gain any information about me from my employer or his family, you tried, at various times, to draw me into familiarity, to get me to talk unreservedly to you; and only gave up the attempt to penetrate my secret, whatever it might be, when we parted after our interview at my house on the night of the storm. On that night, I determined to baulk your curiosity, and yet to gain your confidence; and I succeeded. You little thought, when you bade me farewell at my own door, that you had given your hand and your friendship to a man, who--long before you met with Margaret Sherwin--had inherited the right to be the enemy of your father, and of every descendant of your father's house.

"Does this declaration surprise you? Read on, and you will understand it.

"I am the son of a gentleman. My father's means were miserably limited, and his family was not an old family, like yours. Nevertheless, he was a gentleman in anybody's sense of the word; he knew it, and that knowledge

was his ruin. He was a weak, kind, careless man; a worshipper of conventionalities; and a great respecter of the wide gaps which lay between social stations in his time. Thus, he determined to live like a gentleman, by following a gentleman's pursuit--a profession, as distinguished from a trade. Failing in this, he failed to follow out his principle, and starve like a gentleman. He died the death of a felon; leaving me no inheritance but the name of a felon's son.

"While still a young man, he contrived to be introduced to a gentleman of great family, great position, and great wealth. He interested, or fancied he interested, this gentleman; and always looked on him as the patron who was to make his fortune, by getting him the first government sinecure (they were plenty enough in those days!) which might fall vacant. In firm and foolish expectation of this, he lived far beyond his little professional income--lived among rich people without the courage to make use of them as a poor man. It was the old story: debts and liabilities of all kinds pressed heavy on him--creditors refused to wait--exposure and utter ruin threatened him--and the prospect of the sinecure was still as far off as ever.

"Nevertheless he believed in the advent of this office; and all the more resolutely now, because he looked to it as his salvation. He was quite confident of the interest of his patron, and of its speedy exertion in his behalf. Perhaps, that gentleman had overrated his own political influence; perhaps, my father had been too sanguine, and had misinterpreted polite general promises into special engagements. However it was, the bailiffs came into his house one morning, while help from a government situation, or any situation, was as unattainable as ever--came to take him to prison: to seize everything, in execution, even to the very bed on which my mother (then seriously ill) was lying. The whole fabric of false prosperity which he had been building up to make the world respect him, was menaced with instant and shameful overthrow. He had not the courage to let it go; so he took refuge from misfortune in a crime.

"He forged a bond, to prop up his credit for a little time longer. The name he made use of was the name of his patron. In doing this, he believed--as all men who commit crime believe--that he had the best possible chance of escaping consequences. In the first place, he might get the long-expected situation in time to repay the amount of the bond before detection. In the second place, he had almost the certainty of a legacy from a rich relative, old and in ill-health, whose death might be fairly expected from day to day. If both these prospects failed (and they did fail), there was still a third chance--the chance that his rich patron would rather pay the money than appear against him. In those days they hung for forgery. My father believed it to be

impossible that a man at whose table he had sat, whose relatives and friends he had amused and instructed by his talents, would be the man to give evidence which should condemn him to be hanged on the public scaffold.

"He was wrong. The wealthy patron held strict principles of honour which made no allowance for temptations and weaknesses; and was moreover influenced by high-flown notions of his responsibilities as a legislator (he was a member of Parliament) to the laws of his country. He appeared accordingly, and gave evidence against the prisoner; who was found guilty, and left for execution.

"Then, when it was too late, this man of pitiless honour thought himself at last justified in leaning to the side of mercy, and employed his utmost interest, in every direction, to obtain a mitigation of the sentence to transportation for life. The application failed; even a reprieve of a few days was denied. At the appointed time, my father died on the scaffold by the hangman's hand.

"Have you suspected, while reading this part of my letter, who the high-born gentleman was whose evidence hung him? If you have not, I will tell you. That gentleman was your father. You will now wonder no longer how I could have inherited the right to be his enemy, and the enemy of all who are of his blood.

"The shock of her husband's horrible death deprived my mother of reason. She lived a few months after his execution; but never recovered her faculties. I was their only child; and was left penniless to begin life as the son of a father who had been hanged, and of a mother who had died in a public madhouse.

"More of myself to-morrow--my letter will be a long one: I must pause often over it, as I pause to-day."

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"Well: I started in life with the hangman's mark on me--with the parent's shame for the son's reputation. Wherever I went, whatever friends I kept, whatever acquaintances I made--people knew how my father had died: and showed that they knew it. Not so much by shunning or staring at me (vile as human nature is, there were not many who did that), as by insulting me with over-acted sympathy, and elaborate anxiety to sham entire ignorance of my father's fate. The gallows-brand was on my forehead; but they were too

benevolently blind to see it. The gallows-infamy was my inheritance; but they were too resolutely generous to discover it! This was hard to bear. However, I was strong-hearted even then, when my sensations were quick, and my sympathies young: so I bore it.

"My only weakness was my father's weakness--the notion that I was born to a station ready made for me, and that the great use of my life was to live up to it. My station! I battled for that with the world for years and years, before I discovered that the highest of all stations is the station a man makes for himself: and the lowest, the station that is made for him by others.

"At starting in life, your father wrote to make me offers of assistance--assistance, after he had ruined me! Assistance to the child, from hands which had tied the rope round the parent's neck! I sent him back his letter. He knew that I was his enemy, his son's enemy, and his son's son's enemy, as long as I lived. I never heard from him again.

"Trusting boldly to myself to carve out my own way, and to live down my undeserved ignominy; resolving in the pride of my integrity to combat openly and fairly with misfortune, I shrank, at first, from disowning my parentage and abandoning my father's name. Standing on my own character, confiding in my intellect and my perseverance, I tried pursuit after pursuit, and was beaten afresh at every new effort. Whichever way I turned, the gallows still rose as the same immovable obstacle between me and fortune, between me and station, between me and my fellowmen. I was morbidly sensitive on this point. The slightest references to my father's fate, however remote or accidental, curdled my blood. I saw open insult, or humiliating compassion, or forced forbearance, in the look and manner of every man about me. So I broke off with old friends, and tried new; and, in seeking fresh pursuits, sought fresh connections, where my father's infamy might be unknown. Wherever I went, the old stain always broke out afresh, just at the moment when I had deceived myself into the belief that it was utterly effaced. I had a warm heart then--it was some time before it turned to stone, and felt nothing. Those were the days when failure and humiliation could still draw tears from me: that epoch in my life is marked in my memory as the epoch when I could weep.

"At last, I gave way before difficulty, and conceded the first step to the calamity which had stood front to front with me so long. I left the neighbourhood where I was known, and assumed the name of a schoolfellow who had died. For some time this succeeded; but the curse of my father's death followed me, though I saw it not. After various employments--still, mind, the employments of a gentleman!--had first supported, then failed me,

I became an usher at a school. It was there that my false name was detected, and my identity discovered again--I never knew through whom. The exposure was effected by some enemy, anonymously. For several days, I thought everybody in the school treated me in an altered way. The cause came out, first in whispers, then in reckless jests, while I was taking care of the boys in the playground. In the fury of the moment I struck one of the most insolent, and the eldest of them, and hurt him rather seriously. The parents heard of it, and threatened me with prosecution; the whole neighbourhood was aroused. I had to leave my situation secretly, by night, or the mob would have pelted the felon's son out of the parish.

"I went back to London, bearing another assumed name; and tried, as a last resource to save me from starvation, the resource of writing. I served my apprenticeship to literature as a hack-author of the lowest degree. Knowing I had talents which might be turned to account, I tried to vindicate them by writing an original work. But my experience of the world had made me unfit to dress my thoughts in popular costume: I could only tell bitter truths bitterly; I exposed licenced hypocrisies too openly; I saw the vicious side of many respectabilities, and said I saw it--in short, I called things by their right names; and no publisher would treat with me. So I stuck to my low task-work; my penny-a lining in third-class newspapers; my translating from Frenchmen and Germans, and plagiarising from dead authors, to supply the raw material for bookmongering by more accomplished bookmongers than I. In this life, there was one advantage which compensated for much misery and meanness, and bitter, biting disappointment: I could keep my identity securely concealed. Character was of no consequence to me; nobody cared to know who I was, or to inquire what I had been--the gallows-mark was smoothed out at last!

"While I was living thus on the offal of literature, I met with a woman of good birth, and fair fortune, whose sympathies or whose curiosity I happened to interest. She and her father and mother received me favourably, as a gentleman who had known better days, and an author whom the public had undeservedly neglected. How I managed to gain their confidence and esteem, without alluding to my parentage, it is not worth while to stop to describe. That I did so you will easily imagine, when I tell you that the woman to whom I refer, consented, with her father's full approval, to become my wife.

"The very day of the marriage was fixed. I believed I had successfully parried all perilous inquiries--but I was wrong. A relation of the family, whom I had never seen, came to town a short time before the wedding. We disliked each other on our first introduction. He was a clever, resolute man of the world, and privately inquired about me to much better purpose in a few days, than

his family had done in several months. Accident favoured him strangely, everything was discovered--literally everything--and I was contemptuously dismissed the house. Could a lady of respectability marry a man (no matter how worthy in her eyes) whose father had been hanged, whose mother had died in a madhouse, who had lived under assumed names, who had been driven from an excellent country neighbourhood, for cruelty to a harmless school-boy? Impossible!

"With this event, my long strife and struggle with the world ended.

"My eyes opened to a new view of life, and the purpose of life. My first aspirations to live up to my birth-right position, in spite of adversity and dishonour, to make my name sweet enough in men's nostrils, to cleanse away the infamy on my father's, were now no more. The ambition which--whether I was a hack-author, a travelling portrait-painter, or an usher at a school--had once whispered to me: low down as you are in dark, miry ways, you are on the path which leads upward to high places in the sunshine afar-off; you are not working to scrape together wealth for another man; you are independent, self-reliant, labouring in your own cause--the daring ambition which had once counselled thus, sank dead within me at last. The strong, stern spirit was beaten by spirits stronger and sterner yet--Infamy and Want.

"I wrote to a man of character and wealth; one of my friends of early days, who had ceased to hold communication with me, like other friends, but, unlike them, had given me up in genuine sorrow: I wrote, and asked him to meet me privately by night. I was too ragged to go to his house, too sensitive still (even if I had gone and had been admitted) to risk encountering people there, who either knew my father, or knew how he had died. I wished to speak to my former friend, unseen, and made the appointment accordingly. He kept it.

"When we met, I said to him:--I have a last favour to ask of you. When we parted years ago, I had high hopes and brave resolutions--both are worn out. I then believed that I could not only rise superior to my misfortune, but could make that very misfortune the motive of my rise. You told me I was too quick of temper, too morbidly sensitive about the slightest reference to my father's death, too fierce and changeable under undeserved trial and disappointment. This might have been true then; but I am altered now: pride and ambition have been persecuted and starved out of me. An obscure, monotonous life, in which thought and spirit may be laid asleep, never to wake again, is the only life I care for. Help me to lead it. I ask you, first, as a beggar, to give me from your superfluity, apparel decent enough to

bear the daylight. I ask you next, to help me to some occupation which will just give me my bread, my shelter, and my hour or two of solitude in the evening. You have plenty of influence to do this, and you know I am honest. You cannot choose me too humble and obscure an employment; let me descend low enough to be lost to sight beneath the world I have lived in; let me go among people who want to know that I work honestly for them, and want to know nothing more. Get me a mean hiding-place to conceal myself and my history in for ever, and then neither attempt to see me nor communicate with me again. If former friends chance to ask after me, tell them I am dead, or gone into another country. The wisest life is the life the animals lead: I want, like them, to serve my master for food, shelter, and liberty to lie asleep now and then in the sunshine, without being driven away as a pest or a trespasser. Do you believe in this resolution?--it is my last.

"He did believe in it; and he granted what I asked. Through his interference and recommendation, I entered the service of Mr. Sherwin.--

"I must stop here for to-day. To-morrow I shall come to disclosures of vital interest to you. Have you been surprised that I, your enemy by every cause of enmity that one man can have against another, should write to you so fully about the secrets of my early life? I have done so, because I wish the strife between us to be an open strife on my side; because I desire that you should know thoroughly what you have to expect from my character, after such a life as I have led. There was purpose in my deceit, when I deceived you--there is purpose in my frankness, when I now tell you all."

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"I began in Mr. Sherwin's employment, as the lowest clerk in his office. Both the master and the men looked a little suspiciously on me, at first. My account of myself was always the same--simple and credible; I had entered the counting-house with the best possible recommendation, and I acted up to it. These circumstances in my favour, joined to a manner that never varied, and to a steadiness at my work that never relaxed, soon produced their effect--all curiosity about me gradually died away: I was left to pursue my avocations in peace. The friend who had got me my situation, preserved my secret as I had desired him; of all the people whom I had formerly known, pitiless enemies and lukewarm adherents, not one ever suspected that my hiding-place was the back office of a linen-draper's shop. For the first time in my life, I felt that the secret of my father's misfortune was mine, and mine only; that my security from exposure was at length complete.

"Before long, I rose to the chief place in the counting-house. It was no very difficult matter for me to discover, that my new master's character had other elements besides that of the highest respectability. In plain terms, I found him to be a pretty equal compound by nature, of the fool, the tyrant, and the coward. There was only one direction in which what grovelling sympathies he had, could be touched to some purpose. Save him waste, or get him profit; and he was really grateful. I succeeded in working both these marvels. His managing man cheated him; I found it out; refused to be bribed to collusion; and exposed the fraud to Mr. Sherwin. This got me his confidence, and the place of chief clerk. In that position, I discovered a means, which had never occurred to my employer, of greatly enlarging his business and its profits, with the least possible risk. He tried my plan, and it succeeded. This gained me his warmest admiration, an increase of salary, and a firm footing in his family circle. My projects were more than fulfilled: I had money enough, and leisure enough; and spent my obscure existence exactly as I had proposed.

"But my life was still not destined to be altogether devoid of an animating purpose. When I first knew Margaret Sherwin, she was just changing from childhood to girlhood. I marked the promise of future beauty in her face and figure; and secretly formed the resolution which you afterwards came forward to thwart, but which I have executed, and will execute, in spite of you.

"The thoughts out of which that resolution sprang, counselled me more calmly than you can suppose. I said within myself: 'The best years of my life have been irrevocably wasted; misery and humiliation and disaster have followed my steps from my youth; of all the pleasant draughts which other men drink to sweeten existence, not one has passed my lips. I will know happiness before I die; and this girl shall confer it. She shall grow up to maturity for me: I will imperceptibly gain such a hold on her affections, while they are yet young and impressible, that, when the time comes, and I speak the word--though my years more than double hers, though I am dependent on her father for the bread I eat, though parents' voice and lover's voice unite to call her back--she shall still come to my side, and of her own free will put her hand in mine, and follow me wherever I go; my wife, my mistress, my servant, which I choose.

"This was my project. To execute it, time and opportunity were mine; and I steadily and warily made use of them, hour by hour, day by day, year by year. From first to last, the girl's father never suspected me. Besides the security which he felt in my age, he had judged me by his own small commercial standard, and had found me a model of integrity. A man who

had saved him from being cheated, who had so enlarged and consolidated his business as to place him among the top dignitaries of the trade; who was the first to come to the desk in the morning, and the last to remain there in the evening; who had not only never demanded, but had absolutely refused to take, a single holiday--such a man as this was, morally and intellectually, a man in ten thousand; a man to be admired and trusted in every relation of life!

"His confidence in me knew no bounds. He was uneasy if I was not by to advise him in the simplest matters. My ears were the first to which he confided his insane ambition on the subject of his daughter--his anxiety to see her marry above her station--his stupid resolution to give her the false, flippant, fashionable education which she subsequently received. I thwarted his plans in nothing, openly--counteracted them in everything, secretly. The more I strengthened my sources of influence over Margaret, the more pleased he was. He was delighted to hear her constantly referring to me about her home-lessons; to see her coming to me, evening after evening, to learn new occupations and amusements. He suspected I had been a gentleman; he had been told I spoke pure English; he felt sure I had received a first-rate education--I was nearly as good for Margaret as good society itself! When she grew older, and went to the fashionable school, as her father had declared she should, my offer to keep up her lessons in the holidays, and to examine what progress she had made, when she came home regularly every fortnight for the Sunday, was accepted with greedy readiness, and acknowledged with servile gratitude. At this time, Mr. Sherwin's own estimate of me, among his friends, was, that he had got me for half nothing, and that I was worth more to him than a thousand a-year.

"But there was one member of the family who suspected my intentions from the first. Mrs. Sherwin--the weak, timid, sickly woman, whose opinion nobody regarded, whose character nobody understood--Mrs. Sherwin, of all those who dwelt in the house, or came to the house, was the only one whose looks, words, and manner kept me constantly on my guard. The very first time we saw each other, that woman doubted me, as I doubted her; and for ever afterwards, when we met, she was on the watch. This mutual distrust, this antagonism of our two natures, never openly proclaimed itself, and never wore away. My chance of security lay, not so much in my own caution, and my perfect command of look and action under all emergencies, as in the self-distrust and timidity of her nature; in the helpless inferiority of position to which her husband's want of affection, and her daughter's want of respect, condemned her in her own house; and in the influence of repulsion--at times, even of absolute terror--which my presence had the power of communicating to her. Suspecting what I am assured she suspected--

incapable as she was of rendering her suspicions certainties--knowing beforehand, as she must have known, that no words she could speak would gain the smallest respect or credit from her husband or her child--that woman's life, while I was at North Villa, must have been a life of the direst mental suffering to which any human being was ever condemned.

"As time passed, and Margaret grew older, her beauty both of face and form approached nearer to perfection than I had foreseen, closely as I watched her. But neither her mind nor her disposition kept pace with her beauty. I studied her closely, with the same patient, penetrating observation, which my experience of the world has made it a habit with me to direct on every one with whom I am brought in contact--I studied her, I say, intently; and found her worthy of nothing, not even of the slave-destiny which I had in store for her.

"She had neither heart nor mind, in the higher sense of those words. She had simply instincts--most of the bad instincts of an animal; none of the good. The great motive power which really directed her, was Deceit. I never met with any human being so inherently disingenuous, so naturally incapable of candour even in the most trifling affairs of life, as she was. The best training could never have wholly overcome this vice in her: the education she actually got--an education under false pretences--encouraged it. Everybody has read, some people have known, of young girls who have committed the most extraordinary impostures, or sustained the most infamous false accusations; their chief motive being often the sheer enjoyment of practising deceit. Of such characters was the character of Margaret Sherwin.

"She had strong passions, but not their frequent accompaniment--strong will, and strong intellect. She had some obstinacy, but no firmness. Appeal in the right way to her vanity, and you could make her do the thing she had declared she would not do, the minute after she had made the declaration. As for her mind, it was of the lowest schoolgirl average. She had a certain knack at learning this thing, and remembering that; but she understood nothing fairly, felt nothing deeply. If I had not had my own motive in teaching her, I should have shut the books again, the first time she and I opened them together, and have given her up as a fool.

"All, however, that I discovered of bad in her character, never made me pause in the prosecution of my design; I had carried it too far for that, before I thoroughly knew her. Besides, what mattered her duplicity to me?--I could see through it. Her strong passions?--I could control them. Her obstinacy?--I could break it. Her poverty of intellect?--I cared nothing about her intellect.

What I wanted was youth and beauty; she was young and beautiful and I was sure of her.

"Yes; sure. Her showy person, showy accomplishments, and showy manners dazzled all eyes but mine--Of all the people about her, I alone found out what she really was; and in that lay the main secret of my influence over her. I dreaded no rivalry. Her father, prompted by his ambitious hopes, kept most young men of her class away from the house; the few who did come were not dangerous; they were as incapable of inspiring, as she was of feeling, real love. Her mother still watched me, and still discovered nothing; still suspected me behind my back, and still trembled before my face. Months passed on monotonously, year succeeded to year; and I bided my time as patiently, and kept my secret as cautiously as at the first. No change occurred, nothing happened to weaken or alter my influence at North Villa, until the day arrived when Margaret left school and came home for good.

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"Exactly at the period to which I have referred, certain business transactions of great importance required the presence of Mr. Sherwin, or of some confidential person to represent him, at Lyons. Secretly distrusting his own capabilities, he proposed to me to go; saying that it would be a pleasant trip for me, and a good introduction to his wealthy manufacturing correspondents. After some consideration, I accepted his offer.

"I had never hinted a word of my intentions towards her to Margaret; but she understood them well enough--I was certain of that, from many indications which no man could mistake. For reasons which will presently appear, I resolved not to explain myself until my return from Lyons. My private object in going there, was to make interest secretly with Mr. Sherwin's correspondents for a situation in their house. I knew that when I made my proposals to Margaret, I must be prepared to act on them on the instant; I knew that her father's fury when he discovered that I had been helping to educate his daughter only for myself, would lead him to any extremities; I knew that we must fly to some foreign country; and, lastly, I knew the importance of securing a provision for our maintenance, when we got there. I had saved money, it is true--nearly two-thirds of my salary, every year--but had not saved enough for two. Accordingly, I left England to push my own interests, as well as my employer's; left it, confident that my short absence would not weaken the result of years of steady influence over Margaret. The sequel showed that, cautious and calculating as I was, I had nevertheless overlooked the chances against me, which my own experience of her vanity and duplicity ought to have enabled me thoroughly to foresee.

"Well: I had been some time at Lyons; had managed my employer's business (from first to last, I was faithful, as I had engaged to be, to his commercial interests); and had arranged my own affairs securely and privately. Already, I was looking forward, with sensations of happiness which were new to me, to my return and to the achievement of the one success, the solitary triumph of my long life of humiliation and disaster, when a letter arrived from Mr. Sherwin. It contained the news of your private marriage, and of the extraordinary conditions that had been attached to it with your consent.

"Other people were in the room with me when I read that letter; but my manner betrayed nothing to them. My hand never trembled when I folded the sheet of paper again; I was not a minute late in attending a business engagement which I had accepted; the slightest duties of other kinds which I had to do, I rigidly fulfilled. Never did I more thoroughly and fairly earn the evening's leisure by the morning's work, than I earned it that day.

"Leaving the town at the close of afternoon, I walked on till I came to a solitary place on the bank of the great river which runs near Lyons. There I opened the letter for the second time, and read it through again slowly, with no necessity now for self-control, because no human being was near to look at me. There I read your name, constantly repeated in every line of writing; and knew that the man who, in my absence, had stepped between me and my prize--the man who, in his insolence of youth, and birth, and fortune, had snatched from me the one long-delayed reward for twenty years of misery, just as my hands were stretched forth to grasp it, was the son of that honourable and high-born gentleman who had given my father to the gallows, and had made me the outcast of my social privileges for life.

"The sun was setting when I looked up from the letter; flashes of rose-light leapt on the leaping river; the birds were winging nestward to the distant trees, and the ghostly stillness of night was sailing solemnly over earth and sky, as the first thought of the vengeance I would have on father and son began to burn fiercely at my heart, to move like a new life within me, to whisper to my spirit--Wait: be patient; they are both in your power; you can now foul the father's name as the father fouled yours--you can yet thwart the son, as the son has thwarted you.

"In the few minutes that passed, while I lingered in that lonely place after reading the letter, I imagined the whole scheme which it afterwards took a year to execute. I laid the whole plan against you and your father, the first half of which, through the accident that led you to your discovery, has alone been carried out. I believed then, as I believe now, that I stood towards you

both in the place of an injured man, whose right it was, in self-defence and self-assertion, to injure you. Judged by your ideas, this may read wickedly; but to me, after having lived and suffered as I have, the modern common-places current in the world are so many brazen images which society impudently worships--like the Jews of old--in the face of living Truth.

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"Let us get back to England.

"That evening, when we met for the first time, did you observe that Margaret was unusually agitated before I came in? I detected some change, the moment I saw her. Did you notice that I avoided speaking to her, or looking at her? it was because I was afraid to do so. I saw that, with my return, my old influence over her was coming back: and I still believe that, hypocritical and heartless though she was, and blinded though you were by your passion for her, she would unconsciously have betrayed everything to you on that evening, if I had not acted as I did. Her mother, too! how her mother watched me from the moment when I came in!

"Afterwards, while you were trying hard to open, undetected, the sealed history of my early life, I was warily discovering from Margaret all that I desired to know. I say 'warily,' but the word poorly expresses my consummate caution and patience, at that time. I never put myself in her power, never risked offending, or frightening, or revolting her; never lost an opportunity of bringing her back to her old habits of familiarity; and, more than all, never gave her mother a single opportunity of detecting me. This was the sum of what I gathered up, bit by bit, from secret and scattered investigations, persevered in through many weeks.

"Her vanity had been hurt, her expectations disappointed, at my having left her for Lyons, with no other parting words than such as I might have spoken to any other woman whom I looked on merely as a friend. That she felt any genuine love for me I never have believed, and never shall: but I had that practical ability, that firmness of will, that obvious personal ascendancy over most of those with whom I came in contact, which extorts the respect and admiration of women of all characters, and even of women of no character at all. As far as her senses, her instincts, and her pride could take her, I had won her over to me but no farther--because no farther could she go. I mention pride among her motives, advisedly. She was proud of being the object of such attentions as I had now paid to her for years, because she fancied that, through those attentions, I, who, more or less, ruled everyone else in her sphere, had yielded to her the power of ruling me. The manner of

my departure from England showed her too plainly that she had miscalculated her influence, and that the power, in her case, as in the case of others, was all on my side. Hence the wound to her vanity, to which I have alluded.

"It was while this wound was still fresh that you met her, and appealed to her self-esteem in a new direction. You must have seen clearly enough, that such proposals as yours far exceeded the most ambitious expectations formed by her father. No man's alliance could have lifted her much higher out of her own class: she knew this, and from that knowledge married you--married you for your station, for your name, for your great friends and connections, for your father's money, and carriages, and fine houses; for everything, in short, but yourself.

"Still, in spite of the temptations of youth, wealth, and birth which your proposals held out to her, she accepted them at first (I made her confess it herself) with a secret terror and misgiving, produced by the remembrance of me. These sensations, however, she soon quelled, or fancied she quelled; and these, it was now my last, best chance to revive. I had a whole year for the work before me; and I felt certain of success.

"On your side, you had immense advantages. You had social superiority; you had her father's full approbation; and you were married to her. If she had loved you for yourself, loved you for anything besides her own sensual interests, her vulgar ambition, her reckless vanity, every effort I could have made against you would have been defeated from the first. But, setting this out of the question, in spite of the utter heartlessness of her attachment to you, if you had not consented to that condition of waiting a year for her after marriage; or, consenting to it, if you had broken it long before the year was out--knowing, as you should have known, that in most women's eyes a man is not dishonoured by breaking his promise, so long as he breaks it for a woman's sake--if, I say, you had taken either of these courses, I should still have been powerless against you. But you remained faithful to your promise, faithful to the condition, faithful to the ill-directed modesty of your love; and that very fidelity put you in my power. A pure-minded girl would have loved you a thousand times better for acting as you did--but Margaret Sherwin was not a pure-minded girl, not a maidenly girl: I have looked into her thoughts, and I know it.

"Such were your chances against me; and such was the manner in which you misused them. On my side, I had indefatigable patience; personal advantages equal, with the exception of birth and age, to yours: long-established influence; freedom to be familiar; and more than all, that

stealthy, unflagging strength of purpose which only springs from the desire of revenge. I first thoroughly tested your character, and discovered on what points it was necessary for me to be on my guard against you, when you took shelter under my roof from the storm. If your father had been with you on that night, there were moments, while the tempest was wrought to its full fury, when, if my voice could have called the thunder down on the house to crush it and every one in it to atoms, I would have spoken the word, and ended the strife for all of us. The wind, the hail, and the lightning maddened my thoughts of your father and you--I was nearly letting you see it, when that flash came between us as we parted at my door.

"How I gained your confidence, you know; and you know also, how I contrived to make you use me, afterwards, as the secret friend who procured you privileges with Margaret which her father would not grant at your own request. This, at the outset, secured me from suspicion on your part; and I had only to leave it to your infatuation to do the rest. With you my course was easy--with her it was beset by difficulties; but I overcame them. Your fatal consent to wait through a year of probation, furnished me with weapons against you, which I employed to the most unscrupulous purpose. I can picture to myself what would be your indignation and your horror, if I fully described the use which I made of the position in which your compliance with her father's conditions placed you towards Margaret. I spare you this avowal--it would be useless now. Consider me what you please; denounce my conduct in any terms you like: my justification will always be the same. I was the injured man, you were the aggressor; I was righting myself by getting back a possession of which you had robbed me, and any means were sanctified by such an end as that.

"But my success, so far, was of little avail, in itself; against the all-powerful counter-attraction which you possessed. Contemptible, or not, you still had this superiority over me--you could make a fine lady of her. From that fact sprang the ambition which all my influence, dating as it did from her childhood, could not destroy. There, was fastened the main-spring which regulated her selfish devotion to you, and which it was next to impossible to snap asunder. I never made the attempt.

"The scheme which I proposed to her, when she was fully prepared to hear it, and to conceal that she had heard it, left her free to enjoy all the social advantages which your alliance could bestow--free to ride in her carriage, and go into her father's shop (that was one of her ambitions!) as a new customer added to his aristocratic connection--free even to become one of your family, unsuspected, in case your rash marriage was forgiven. Your credulity rendered the execution of this scheme easy. In what manner it was

to be carried out, and what object I proposed to myself in framing it, I abstain from avowing; for the simple reason that the discovery at which you arrived by following us on the night of the party, made my plan abortive, and has obliged me since to renounce it. I need only say, in this place, that it threatened your father as well as you, and that Margaret recoiled from it at first--not from any horror of the proposal, but through fear of discovery. Gradually, I overcame her apprehensions: very gradually, for I was not thoroughly secure of her devotion to my purpose, until your year of probation was nearly out.

"Through all that year, daily visitor as you were at North Villa, you never suspected either of us! And yet, had you been one whit less infatuated, how many warnings you might have discovered, which, in spite of her duplicity and my caution, would then have shown themselves plainly enough to put you on your guard! Those abrupt changes in her manner, those alternate fits of peevish silence and capricious gaiety, which sometimes displayed themselves even in your presence, had every one of them their meaning--though you could not discern it. Sometimes, they meant fear of discovery, sometimes fear of me: now, they might be traced back to hidden contempt; now, to passions swelling under fancied outrage; now, to secret remembrance of disclosures I had just made, or eager anticipation of disclosures I had yet to reveal. There were times at which every step of the way along which I was advancing was marked, faintly yet significantly, in her manner and her speech, could you only have interpreted them aright. My first renewal of my old influence over her, my first words that degraded you in her eyes, my first successful pleading of my own cause against yours, my first appeal to those passions in her which I knew how to move, my first proposal to her of the whole scheme which I had matured in solitude, in the foreign country, by the banks of the great river--all these separate and gradual advances on my part towards the end which I was vowed to achieve, were outwardly shadowed forth in her, consummate as were her capacities for deceit, and consummately as she learnt to use them against you.

"Do you remember noticing, on your return from the country, how ill Margaret looked, and how ill I looked? We had some interviews during your absence, at which I spoke such words to her as would have left their mark on the face of a Jezebel, or a Messalina. Have you forgotten how often, during the latter days of your year of expectation, I abruptly left the room after you had called me in to bear you company in your evening readings? My pretext was sudden illness; and illness it was, but not of the body. As the time approached, I felt less and less secure of my own caution and patience. With you, indeed, I might still have considered myself safe: it was the presence of Mrs. Sherwin that drove me from the room. Under that

woman's fatal eye I shrank, when the last days drew near--I, who had defied her detection, and stood firmly on my guard against her sleepless, silent, deadly vigilance, for months and months--gave way as the end approached! I knew that she had once or twice spoken strangely to you, and I dreaded lest her wandering, incoherent words might yet take in time a recognisable direction, a palpable shape. They did not; the instinct of terror bound her tongue to the last. Perhaps, even if she had spoken plainly, you would not have believed her; you would have been still true to yourself and to your confidence in Margaret. Enemy as I am to you, enemy as I will be to the day of your death, I will do you justice for the past:--Your love for that girl was a love which even the purest and best of women could never have thoroughly deserved.

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"My letter is nearly done: my retrospect is finished. I have brought it down to the date of events, about which you know as much as I do. Accident conducted you to a discovery which, otherwise, you might not have made, perhaps for months, perhaps not at all, until I had led you to it of my own accord. I say accident, positively; knowing that from first to last I trusted no third person. What you know, you knew by accident alone.

"But for that chance discovery, you would have seen me bring her back to North Villa at the appointed time, in my care, just as she went out. I had no dread of her meeting you. But enough of her! I shall dispose of her future, as I had resolved to dispose of it years ago; careless how she may be affected when she first sees the hideous alteration which your attack has wrought in me. Enough, I say, of the Sherwins--father, mother, and daughter--your destiny lies not with them, but with me.

"Do you still exult in having deformed me in every feature, in having given me a face to revolt every human being who looks at me? Do you triumph in the remembrance of this atrocity, as you triumphed in the acting of it--believing that you had destroyed my future with Margaret, in destroying my very identity as a man? I tell you, that with the hour when I leave this hospital your day of triumph will be over, and your day of expiation will begin--never to end till the death of one of us. You shall live--refined educated gentleman as you are--to wish, like a ruffian, that you had killed me; and your father shall live to wish it too.

"Am I trying to awe you with the fierce words of a boaster and a bully? Test me, by looking back a little, and discovering what I have abstained from for the sake of my purpose, since I have been here. A word or two from my lips,

in answer to the questions with which I have been baited, day after day, by those about me, would have called you before a magistrate to answer for an assault--a shocking and a savage assault, even in this country, where hand to hand brutality is a marketable commodity between the Prisoner and the Law. Your father's name might have been publicly coupled with your dishonour, if I had but spoken; and I was silent. I kept the secret--kept it, because to avenge myself on you by a paltry scandal, which you and your family (opposing to it wealth, position, previous character, and general sympathy) would live down in a few days, was not my revenge: because to be righted before magistrates and judges by a beggarman's exhibition of physical injury, and a coward's confession of physical defeat, was not my way of righting myself. I have a lifelong retaliation in view, which laws and lawgivers are powerless either to aid or to oppose--the retaliation which set a mark upon Cain (as I will set a mark on you); and then made his life his punishment (as I will make your life yours).

"How? Remember what my career has been; and know that I will make your career like it. As my father's death by the hangman affected my existence, so the events of that night when you followed me shall affect yours. Your father shall see you living the life to which his evidence against my father condemned me--shall see the foul stain of your disaster clinging to you wherever you go. The infamy with which I am determined to pursue you, shall be your own infamy that you cannot get quit of--for you shall never get quit of me, never get quit of the wife who has dishonoured you. You may leave your home, and leave England; you may make new friends, and seek new employments; years and years may pass away--and still, you shall not escape us: still, you shall never know when we are near, or when we are distant; when we are ready to appear before you, or when we are sure to keep out of your sight. My deformed face and her fatal beauty shall hunt you through the world. The terrible secret of your dishonour, and of the atrocity by which you avenged it, shall ooze out through strange channels, in vague shapes, by tortuous intangible processes; ever changing in the manner of its exposure, never remediable by your own resistance, and always directed to the same end--your isolation as a marked man, in every fresh sphere, among every new community to which you retreat.

"Do you call this a very madness of malignity and revenge? It is the only occupation in life for which your mutilation of me has left me fit; and I accept it, as work worthy of my deformity. In the prospect of watching how you bear this hunting through life, that never quite hunts you down; how long you resist the poison-influence, as slow as it is sure, of a crafty tongue that cannot be silenced, of a denouncing presence that cannot be fled, of a damning secret torn from you and exposed afresh each time you have

hidden it--there is the promise of a nameless delight which it sometimes fevers, sometimes chills my blood to think of. Lying in this place at night, in those hours of darkness and stillness when the surrounding atmosphere of human misery presses heavy on me in my heavy sleep, prophecies of dread things to come between us, trouble my spirit in dreams. At those times, I know, and shudder in knowing, that there is something besides the motive of retaliation, something less earthly and apparent than that, which urges me horribly and supernaturally to link myself to you for life; which makes me feel as the bearer of a curse that shall follow you; as the instrument of a fatality pronounced against you long ere we met--a fatality beginning before our fathers were parted by the hangman; perpetuating itself in you and me; ending who shall say how, or when?

"Beware of comforting yourself with a false security, by despising my words, as the wild words of a madman, dreaming of the perpetration of impossible crimes. Throughout this letter I have warned you of what you may expect; because I will not assail you at disadvantage, as you assailed me; because it is my pleasure to ruin you, openly resisting me at every step. I have given you fair play, as the huntsmen give fair play at starting to the animal they are about to run down. Be warned against seeking a false hope in the belief that my faculties are shaken, and that my resolves are visionary--false, because such a hope is only despair in disguise.

"I have done. The time is not far distant when my words will become deeds. They cure fast in a public hospital: we shall meet soon!

"ROBERT MANNION."

"We shall meet soon!"

How? Where? I looked back at the last page of writing. But my attention wandered strangely; I confused one paragraph with another; the longer I read, the less I was able to grasp the meaning, not of sentences merely, but even of the simplest words.

From the first lines to the last, the letter had produced no distinct impressions on my mind. So utterly was I worn out by the previous events of the day, that even those earlier portions of Mannion's confession, which revealed the connection between my father and his, and the terrible manner of their separation, hardly roused me to more than a momentary astonishment. I just called to remembrance that I had never heard the

subject mentioned at home, except once or twice in vague hints dropped mysteriously by an old servant, and little regarded by me at the time, as referring to matters which had happened before I was born. I just reflected thus briefly and languidly on the narrative at the commencement of the letter; and then mechanically read on. Except the passages which contained the exposure of Margaret's real character, and those which described the origin and progress of Mannion's infamous plot, nothing in the letter impressed me, as I was afterwards destined to be impressed by it, on a second reading. The lethargy of all feeling into which I had now sunk, seemed a very lethargy of death.

I tried to clear and concentrate my faculties by thinking of other subjects; but without success. All that I had heard and seen since the morning, now recurred to me more and more vaguely and confusedly. I could form no plan either for the present or the future. I knew as little how to meet Mr. Sherwin's last threat of forcing me to acknowledge his guilty daughter, as how to defend myself against the life-long hostility with which I was menaced by Mannion. A feeling of awe and apprehension, which I could trace to no distinct cause, stole irresistibly and mysteriously over me. A horror of the searching brightness of daylight, a suspicion of the loneliness of the place to which I had retreated, a yearning to be among my fellow-creatures again, to live where there was life--the busy life of London--overcame me. I turned hastily, and walked back from the suburbs to the city.

It was growing towards evening as I gained one of the great thoroughfares. Seeing some of the inhabitants of the houses, as I walked along, sitting at their open windows to enjoy the evening air, the thought came to me for the first time that day:--where shall I lay my head tonight? Home I had none. Friends who would have gladly received me were not wanting; but to go to them would oblige me to explain myself; to disclose something of the secret of my calamity; and this I was determined to keep concealed, as I had told my father I would keep it. My last-left consolation was my knowledge of still preserving that resolution, of still honourably holding by it at all hazards, cost what it might.

So I thought no more of succour or sympathy from any one of my friends. As a stranger I had been driven from my home, and as a stranger I was resigned to live, until I had learnt how to conquer my misfortune by my own vigour and endurance. Firm in this determination, though firm in nothing else, I now looked around me for the first shelter I could purchase from strangers--the humbler the better.

I happened to be in the poorest part, and on the poorest side of the great street along which I was walking--among the inferior shops, and the houses of few stories. A room to let was not hard to find here. I took the first I saw; escaped questions about names and references by paying my week's rent in advance; and then found myself left in possession of the one little room which I must be resigned to look on for the future--perhaps for a long future!--as my home.

Home! A dear and a mournful remembrance was revived in the reflections suggested by that simple word. Through the darkness that thickened over my mind, there now passed one faint ray of light which gave promise of the morning--the light of the calm face that I had last looked on when it was resting on my father's breast.

Clara! My parting words to her, when I had unclasped from my neck those kind arms which would fain have held me to home for ever, had expressed a promise that was yet unfulfilled. I trembled as I now thought on my sister's situation. Not knowing whither I had turned my steps on leaving home; uncertain to what extremities my despair might hurry me; absolutely ignorant even whether she might ever see me again--it was terrible to reflect on the suspense under which she might be suffering, at this very moment, on my account. My promise to write to her, was of all promises the most vitally important, and the first that should be fulfilled.

My letter was very short. I communicated to her the address of the house in which I was living (well knowing that nothing but positive information on this point would effectually relieve her anxiety)--I asked her to write in reply, and let me hear some news of her, the best that she could give--and I entreated her to believe implicitly in my patience and courage under every disaster; and to feel assured that, whatever happened, I should never lose the hope of soon meeting her again. Of the perils that beset me, of the wrong and injury I might yet be condemned to endure, I said nothing. Those were truths which I was determined to conceal from her, to the last. She had suffered for me more than I dared think of, already!

I sent my letter by hand, so as to ensure its immediate delivery. In writing those few simple lines, I had no suspicion of the important results which they were destined to produce. In thinking of to-morrow, and of all the events which to-morrow might bring with it, I little thought whose voice would be the first to greet me the next day, whose hand would be held out to me as the helping hand of a friend.

VI.

It was still early in the morning, when a loud knock sounded at the house-door, and I heard the landlady calling to the servant: "A gentleman to see the gentleman who came in last night." The moment the words reached me, my thoughts recurred to the letter of yesterday--Had Mannion found me out in my retreat? As the suspicion crossed my mind, the door opened, and the visitor entered.

I looked at him in speechless astonishment. It was my elder brother! It was Ralph himself who now walked into the room!

"Well, Basil! how are you?" he said, with his old off-hand manner and hearty voice.

"Ralph! You in England!--you here!"

"I came back from Italy last night. Basil, how awfully you're changed! I hardly know you again."

His manner altered as he spoke the last words. The look of sorrow and alarm which he fixed on me, went to my heart. I thought of holiday-time, when we were boys; of Ralph's boisterous ways with me; of his good-humoured school-frolics, at my expense; of the strong bond of union between us, so strangely compounded of my weakness and his strength; of my passive and of his active nature; I saw how little he had changed since that time, and knew, as I never knew before, how miserably I was altered. All the shame and grief of my banishment from home came back on me, at sight of his friendly, familiar face. I struggled hard to keep my self-possession, and tried to bid him welcome cheerfully; but the effort was too much for me. I turned away my head, as I took his hand; for the old school-boy feeling of not letting Ralph see that I was in tears, influenced me still.

"Basil! Basil! what are you about? This won't do. Look up, and listen to me. I have promised Clara to pull you through this wretched mess; and I'll do it. Get a chair, and give me a light. I'm going to sit on your bed, smoke a cigar, and have a long talk with you."

While he was lighting his cigar, I looked more closely at him than before. Though he was the same as ever in manner; though his expression still preserved its reckless levity of former days, I now detected that he had

changed a little in some other respects. His features had become coarser--dissipation had begun to mark them. His spare, active, muscular figure had filled out; he was dressed rather carelessly; and of all his trinkets and chains of early times, not one appeared about him now. Ralph looked prematurely middle-aged, since I had seen him last.

"Well," he began, "first of all, about my coming back. The fact is, the morganatic Mrs. Ralph--" (he referred to his last mistress) "wanted to see England, and I was tired of being abroad. So I brought her back with me; and we're going to live quietly, somewhere in the Brompton neighbourhood. That woman has been my salvation--you must come and see her. She has broke me of gaming altogether; I was going to the devil as fast as I could, when she stopped me--but you know all about it, of course. Well: we got to London yesterday afternoon; and in the evening I left her at the hotel, and went to report myself at home. There, the first thing I heard, was that you had cut me out of my old original distinction of being the family scamp. Don't look distressed, Basil; I'm not laughing at you; I've come to do something better than that. Never mind my talk: nothing in the world ever was serious to me, and nothing ever will be."

He stopped to knock the ash off his cigar, and settle himself more comfortably on my bed; then proceeded.

"It has been my ill-luck to see my father pretty seriously offended on more than one occasion; but I never saw him so very quiet and so very dangerous as last night when he was telling me about you. I remember well enough how he spoke and looked, when he caught me putting away my trout-flies in the pages of that family history of his; but it was nothing to see him or hear him then, to what it is now. I can tell you this, Basil--if I believed in what the poetical people call a broken heart (which I don't), I should be almost afraid that he was broken-hearted. I saw it was no use to say a word for you just yet, so I sat quiet and listened to him till I got my dismissal for the evening. My next proceeding was to go up-stairs, and see Clara. Upstairs, I give you my word of honour, it was worse still. Clara was walking about the room with your letter in her hand--just reach me the matches: my cigar's out. Some men can talk and smoke in equal proportions--I never could.

"You know as well as I do," he continued when he had relit his cigar, "that Clara is not usually demonstrative. I always thought her rather a cold temperament--but the moment I put my head in at the door, I found I'd been just as great a fool on that point as on most others. Basil, the scream Clara gave when she first saw me, and the look in her eyes when she talked about you, positively frightened me. I can't describe anything; and I hate

descriptions by other men (most likely on that very account): so I won't describe what she said and did. I'll only tell you that it ended in my promising to come here the first thing this morning; promising to get you out of the scrape; promising, in short, everything she asked me. So here I am, ready for your business before my own. The fair partner of my existence is at the hotel, half-frantic because I won't go lodging-hunting with her; but Clara is paramount, Clara is the first thought. Somebody must be a good boy at home; and now you have resigned, I'm going to try and succeed you, by way of a change!"

"Ralph! Ralph! can you mention Clara's name, and that woman's name, in the same breath? Did you leave Clara quieter and better! For God's sake be serious about that, though serious about nothing else!"

"Gently, Basil! Doucement mon ami! I did leave her quieter: my promise made her look almost like herself again. As for what you say about mentioning Clara and Mrs. Ralph in the same breath, I've been talking and smoking till I have no second breaths left to devote to second-rate virtue. There is an unanswerable reason for you, if you want one! And now let us get to the business that brings me here. I don't want to worry you by raking up this miserable mess again, from beginning to end, in your presence; but I must make sure at the same time that I have got hold of the right story, or I can't be of any use to you. My father was a little obscure on certain points. He talked enough, and more than enough, about consequences to the family, about his own affliction, about his giving you up for ever; and, in short, about everything but the case itself as it really stands against us. Now that is just what I ought to be put up to, and must be put up to. Let me tell you in three words what I was told last night."

"Go on, Ralph: speak as you please."

"Very good. First of all, I understand that you took a fancy to some shopkeeper's daughter--so far, mind, I don't blame you: I've spent time very pleasantly among the ladies of the counter myself. But in the second place, I'm told that you actually married the girl! I don't wish to be hard upon you, my good fellow, but there was an unparalleled insanity about that act, worthier of a patient in Bedlam than of my brother. I am not quite sure whether I understand exactly what virtuous behaviour is; but if that was virtuous behaviour--there! there! don't look shocked. Let's have done with the marriage, and get on. Well, you made the girl your wife; and then innocently consented to a very queer condition of waiting a year for her (virtuous behaviour again, I suppose!) At the end of that time--don't turn away your head, Basil! I may be a scamp; but I am not blackguard enough

to make a joke--either in your presence, or out of it--of this part of the story. I will pass it over altogether, if you like; and only ask you a question or two. You see, my father either could not or would not speak plainly of the worst part of the business; and you know him well enough to know why. But somebody must be a little explicit, or I can do nothing. About that man? You found the scoundrel out? Did you get within arm's length of him?"

I told my brother of the struggle with Mannion in the Square.

He heard me almost with his former schoolboy delight, when I had succeeded, to his satisfaction, in a feat of strength or activity. He jumped off the bed, and seized both my hands in his strong grasp; his face radiant, his eyes sparkling. "Shake hands, Basil! Shake hands, as we haven't shaken hands yet: this makes amends for everything! One word more, though, about that fellow; where is he now?"

"In the hospital."

Ralph laughed heartily, and jumped back on the bed. I remembered Mannion's letter, and shuddered as I thought of it.

"The next question is about the girl," said my brother. "What has become of her? Where was she all the time of your illness?"

"At her father's house; she is there still."

"Ah, yes! I see; the old story; innocent, of course. And her father backs her, doesn't he? To be sure, that's the old story too. I have got at our difficulty now; we are threatened with an exposure, if you don't acknowledge her. Wait a minute! Have you any evidence against her, besides your own?"

"I have a letter, a long letter from her accomplice, containing a confession of his guilt and hers."

"She is sure to call that confession a conspiracy. It's of no use to us, unless we dared to go to law--and we daren't. We must hush the thing up at any price; or it will be the death of my father. This is a case for money, just as I thought it would be. Mr. and Miss Shopkeeper have got a large assortment of silence to sell; and we must buy it of them, over the domestic counter, at so much a yard. Have you been there yet, Basil, to ask the price and strike the bargain?"

"I was at the house, yesterday."

"The deuce you were! And who did you see?--The father? Did you bring him to terms? did you do business with Mr. Shopkeeper?"

"His manner was brutal: his language, the language of a bully--?"

"So much the better. Those men are easiest dealt with: if he will only fly into a passion with me, I engage for success beforehand. But the end--how did it end?"

"As it began:--in threats on his part, in endurance on mine."

"Ah! we'll see how he likes my endurance next: he'll find it rather a different sort of endurance from yours. By-the-bye, Basil, what money had you to offer him?"

"I made no offer to him then. Circumstances happened which rendered me incapable of thinking of it. I intended to go there again, to-day; and if money would bribe him to silence, and save my family from sharing the dishonour which has fallen on me, to abandon to him the only money I have of my own--the little income left me by our mother."

"Do you mean to say that your only resource is in that wretched trifle, and that you ever really intend to let it go, and start in the world without a rap? Do you mean to say that my father gave you up without making the smallest provision for you, in such a mess as your's? Hang it! do him justice. He has been hard enough on you, I know; but he can't have coolly turned you over to ruin in that way."

"He offered me money, at parting; but with such words of contempt and insult that I would have died rather than take it. I told him that, unaided by his purse, I would preserve him, and preserve his family from the infamous consequences of my calamity--though I sacrificed my own happiness and my own honour for ever in doing it. And I go to-day to make that sacrifice. The loss of the little I have to depend on, is the least part of it. He may not see his injustice in doubting me, till too late; but he shall see it."

"I beg your pardon, Basil; but this is almost as great an insanity, as the insanity of your marriage. I honour the independence of your principle, my dear fellow; but, while I am to the fore, I'll take good care that you don't ruin yourself gratuitously, for the sake of any principles whatever! Just listen to me, now. In the first place, remember that what my father said to you, he said in a moment of violent exasperation. You had been trampling the pride

of his life in the mud: no man likes that--my father least of any. And, as for the offer of your poor little morsel of an income to stop these people's greedy mouths, it isn't a quarter enough for them. They know our family is a wealthy family; and they will make their demand accordingly. Any other sacrifice, even to taking the girl back (though you never could bring yourself to do that!), would be of no earthly use. Nothing but money will do; money cunningly doled out, under the strongest possible stipulations. Now, I'm just the man to do that, and I have got the money--or, rather, my father has, which comes to the same thing. Write me the fellow's name and address; there's no time to be lost--I'm off to see him at once!"

"I can't allow you, Ralph, to ask my father for what I would not ask him myself--"

"Give me the name and address, or you will sour my excellent temper for the rest of my life. Your obstinacy won't do with me, Basil--it didn't at school, and it won't now. I shall ask my father for money for myself; and use as much of it as I think proper for your interests. He'll give me anything I want, now I have turned good boy. I don't owe fifty pounds, since my last debts were paid off--thanks to Mrs. Ralph, who is the most managing woman in the world. By-the-bye, when you see her, don't seem surprised at her being older than I am. Oh! this is the address, is it? Hollyoake Square? Where the devil's that! Never mind, I'll take a cab, and shift the responsibility of finding the place on the driver. Keep up your spirits, and wait here till I come back. You shall have such news of Mr. Shopkeeper and his daughter as you little expect! Au revoir, my dear fellow--au revoir."

He left the room as rapidly as he had entered it. The minute afterwards, I remembered that I ought to have warned him of the fatal illness of Mrs. Sherwin. She might be dying--dead for aught I knew--when he reached the house. I ran to the window, to call him back: it was too late. Ralph was gone.

Even if he were admitted at North Villa, would he succeed? I was little capable of estimating the chances. The unexpectedness of his visit; the strange mixture of sympathy and levity in his manner, of worldly wisdom and boyish folly in his conversation, appeared to be still confusing me in his absence, just as they had confused me in his presence. My thoughts imperceptibly wandered away from Ralph, and the mission he had undertaken on my behalf, to a subject which seemed destined, for the future, to steal on my attention, irresistibly and darkly, in all my lonely hours. Already, the fatality denounced against me in Mannion's letter had begun to act: already, that terrible confession of past misery and crime, that

monstrous declaration of enmity which was to last with the lasting of life, began to exercise its numbing influence on my faculties, to cast its blighting shadow over my heart.

I opened the letter again, and re-read the threats against me at its conclusion. One by one, the questions now arose in my mind: how can I resist, or how escape the vengeance of this evil spirit? how shun the dread deformity of that face, which is to appear before me in secret? how silence that fiend's tongue, or make harmless the poison which it will pour drop by drop into my life? When should I first look for that avenging presence?--now, or not till months hence? Where should I first see it? in the house?--or in the street? At what time would it steal to my side? by night--or by day? Should I show the letter to Ralph?--it would be useless. What would avail any advice or assistance which his reckless courage could give, against an enemy who combined the ferocious vigilance of a savage with the far-sighted iniquity of a civilised man?

As this last thought crossed my mind, I hastily closed the letter; determining (alas! how vainly!) never to open it again. Almost at the same instant, I heard another knock at the house-door. Could Ralph have returned already? impossible! Besides, the knock was very different from his--it was only just loud enough to be audible where I now sat.

Mannion? But would he come thus? openly, fairly, in the broad daylight, through the populous street?

A light, quick step ascended the stairs--my heart bounded; I started to my feet. It was the same step which I used to listen for, and love to hear, in my illness. I ran to the door, and opened it. My instinct had not deceived me! it was my sister!

"Basil!" she exclaimed, before I could speak--"has Ralph been here?"

"Yes, love--yes."

"Where has he gone? what has he done for you? He promised me--"

"And he has kept his promise nobly, Clara: he is away helping me now."

"Thank God! thank God!"

She sank breathless into a chair, as she spoke. Oh, the pang of looking at her at that moment, and seeing how she was changed!--seeing the dimness

and weariness of the gentle eyes; the fear and the sorrow that had already overshadowed the bright young face!

"I shall be better directly," she said, guessing from my expression what I then felt--"but, seeing you in this strange place, after what happened yesterday; and having come here so secretly, in terror of my father finding it out--I can't help feeling your altered position and mine a little painfully at first. But we won't complain, as long as I can get here sometimes to see you: we will only think of the future now. What a mercy, what a happiness it is that Ralph has come back! We have always done him injustice; he is far kinder and far better than we ever thought him. But, Basil, how worn and ill you are looking! Have you not told Ralph everything? Are you in any danger?"

"None, Clara--none, indeed!"

"Don't grieve too deeply about yesterday! Try and forget that horrible parting, and all that brought it about. He has not spoken of it since, except to tell me that I must never know more of your fault and your misfortune, than the little--the very little--I know already. And I have resolved not to think about it, as well as not to ask about it, for the future. I have a hope already, Basil--very, very far off fulfilment--but still a hope. Can you not think what it is?"

"Your hope is far off fulfilment, indeed, Clara, if it is hope from my father!"

"Hush! don't say so; I know better. Something occurred, even so soon as last night--a very trifling event--but enough to show that he thinks of you, already, in grief far more than in anger."

"I wish I could believe it, love; but my remembrance of yesterday--"

"Don't trust that remembrance; don't recall it! I will tell you what occurred. Some time after you had gone, and after I had recovered myself a little in my own room, I went downstairs again to see my father; for I was too terrified and too miserable at what had happened, to be alone. He was not in his room when I got there. As I looked round me for a moment, I saw the pieces of your page in the book about our family, scattered on the floor; and the miniature likeness of you, when you were a child, was lying among the other fragments. It had been torn out of its setting in the paper, but not injured. I picked it up, Basil, and put it on the table, at the place where he always sits; and laid my own little locket, with your hair in it, by the side, so that he might know that the miniature had not been accidentally taken up and put

there by the servant. Then, I gathered together the pieces of the page and took them away with me, thinking it better that he should not see them again. Just as I had got through the door that leads into the library, and was about to close it, I heard the other door, by which you enter the study from the hall, opening; and he came in, and went directly to the table. His back was towards me, so I could look at him unperceived. He observed the miniature directly and stood quite still with it in his hand; then sighed--sighed so bitterly!--and then took the portrait of our dear mother from one of the drawers of the table, opened the case in which it is kept, and put your miniature inside, very gently and tenderly. I could not trust myself to see any more, so I went up to my room again: and shortly afterwards he came in with my locket, and gave it me back, only saying--'You left this on my table, Clara.' But if you had seen his face then, you would have hoped all things from him in the time to come, as I hope now."

"And as I will hope, Clara, though it be from no stronger motive than gratitude to you."

"Before I left home," she proceeded, after a moment's silence, "I thought of your loneliness in this strange place--knowing that I could seldom come to see you, and then only by stealth; by committing a fault which, if my father found it out--but we won't speak of that! I thought of your lonely hours here; and I have brought with me an old, forgotten companion of yours, to bear you company, and to keep you from thinking too constantly on what you have suffered. Look, Basil! won't you welcome this old friend again?"

She gave me a small roll of manuscript, with an effort to resume her kind smile of former days, even while the tears stood thick in her eyes. I untied the leaves, glanced at the handwriting, and saw before me, once more, the first few chapters of my unfinished romance! Again I looked on the patiently-laboured pages, familiar relics of that earliest and best ambition which I had abandoned for love; too faithful records of the tranquil, ennobling pleasures which I had lost for ever! Oh, for one Thought-Flower now, from the dream-garden of the happy Past!

"I took more care of those leaves of writing, after you had thrown them aside, than of anything else I had," said Clara. "I always thought the time would come, when you would return again to the occupation which it was once your greatest pleasure to pursue, and my greatest pleasure to watch. And surely that time has arrived. I am certain, Basil, your book will help you to wait patiently for happier times, as nothing else can. This place must seem very strange and lonely; but the sight of those pages, and the sight of me sometimes (when I can come), may make it look almost like home to you!

The room is not--not very--"

She stopped suddenly. I saw her lip tremble, and her eyes grow dim again, as she looked round her. When I tried to speak all the gratitude I felt, she turned away quickly, and began to busy herself in re-arranging the wretched furniture; in setting in order the glaring ornaments on the chimney-piece; in hiding the holes in the ragged window-curtains; in changing, as far as she could, all the tawdry discomfort of my one miserable little room. She was still absorbed in this occupation, when the church-clocks of the neighbourhood struck the hour--the hour that warned her to stay no longer.

"I must go," she said; "it is later than I thought. Don't be afraid about my getting home: old Martha came here with me, and is waiting downstairs to go back (you know we can trust her). Write to me as often as you can; I shall hear about you every day, from Ralph; but I should like a letter sometimes, as well. Be as hopeful and as patient yourself, dear, under misfortune, as you wish me to be; and I shall despair of nothing. Don't tell Ralph I have been here--he might be angry. I will come again, the first opportunity. Good-bye, Basil! Let us try and part happily, in the hope of better days. Good-bye, dear--good-bye, only for the present!"

Her self-possession nearly failed her, as she kissed me, and then turned to the door. She just signed to me not to follow her down-stairs, and, without looking round again, hurried from the room.

It was well for the preservation of our secret, that she had so resolutely refrained from delaying her departure. She had been gone but for a few minutes--the lovely and consoling influence of her presence was still fresh in my heart--I was still looking sadly over the once precious pages of manuscript which she had restored to me--when Ralph returned from North Villa. I heard him leaping, rather than running, up the ricketty wooden stairs. He burst into my room more impetuously than ever.

"All right!" he said, jumping back to his former place on the bed. "We can buy Mr. Shopkeeper for anything we like--for nothing at all, if we choose to be stingy. His innocent daughter has made the best of all confessions, just at the right time. Basil, my boy, she has left her father's house!"

"What do you mean?"

"She has eloped to the hospital!"

"Mannion!"

"Yes, Mannion: I have got his letter to her. She is criminated by it, even past her father's contradiction--and he doesn't stick at a trifle! But I'll begin at the beginning, and tell you everything. Hang it, Basil, you look as if I'd brought you bad news instead of good!"

"Never mind how I look, Ralph--pray go on!"

"Well: the first thing I heard, on getting to the house, was that Sherwin's wife was dying. The servant took in my name: but I thought of course I shouldn't be admitted. No such thing! I was let in at once, and the first words this fellow, Sherwin, said to me, were, that his wife was only ill, that the servants were exaggerating, and that he was quite ready to hear what Mr. Basil's 'highly-respected' brother (fancy calling me 'highly-respected!') had to say to him. The fool, however, as you see, was cunning enough to try civility to begin with. A more ill-looking human mongrel I never set eyes on! I took the measure of my man directly, and in two minutes told him exactly what I came for, without softening a single word."

"And how did he answer you?"

"As I anticipated, by beginning to bluster immediately. I took him down, just as he swore his second oath. 'Sir,' I said very politely, 'if you mean to make a cursing and a swearing conference of this, I think it only fair to inform you before-hand that you are likely to get the worst of it. When the whole collection of British oaths is exhausted, I can swear fluently in five foreign languages: I have always made it a principle to pay back abuse at compound interest, and I don't exaggerate in saying, that I am quite capable of swearing you out of your senses, if you persist in setting me the example. And now, if you like to go on, pray do--I'm ready to hear you.' While I was speaking, he stared at me in a state of helpless astonishment; when I had done, he began to bluster again--but it was a pompous, dignified, parliamentary sort of bluster, now, ending in his pulling your unlucky marriage-certificate out of his pocket, asserting for the fiftieth time, that the girl was innocent, and declaring that he'd make you acknowledge her, if he went before a magistrate to do it. That's what he said when you saw him, I suppose?"

"Yes: almost word for word."

"I had my answer ready for him, before he could put the certificate back in his pocket. 'Now, Mr. Sherwin,' I said, 'have the goodness to listen to me. My father has certain family prejudices and nervous delicacies, which I do not

inherit from him, and which I mean to take good care to prevent you from working on. At the same time, I beg you to understand that I have come here without his knowledge. I am not my father's ambassador, but my brother's--who is unfit to deal with you, himself; because he is not half hard-hearted, or half worldly enough. As my brother's envoy, therefore, and out of consideration for my father's peculiar feelings, I now offer you, from my own resources, a certain annual sum of money, far more than sufficient for all your daughter's expenses--a sum payable quarterly, on condition that neither you nor she shall molest us; that you shall never make use of our name anywhere; and that the fact of my brother's marriage (hitherto preserved a secret) shall for the future be consigned to oblivion. We keep our opinion of your daughter's guilt--you keep your opinion of her innocence. We have silence to buy, and you have silence to sell, once a quarter; and if either of us break our conditions, we both have our remedy--your's the easy remedy, our's the difficult. This arrangement--a very unfair and dangerous for us; a very advantageous and safe one for you--I understand that you finally refuse?' 'Sir,' says he, solemnly, 'I should be unworthy the name of a father--' 'Thank you'--I remarked, feeling that he was falling back on paternal sentiment--'thank you; I quite understand. We will get on, if you please, to the reverse side of the question.'"

"The reverse side! What reverse side, Ralph? What could you possibly say more?"

"You shall hear. 'Being, on your part, thoroughly determined,' I said, 'to permit no compromise, and to make my brother (his family of course included) acknowledge a woman, of whose guilt they entertain not the slightest doubt, you think you can gain your object by threatening an exposure. Don't threaten any more! Make your exposure! Go to the magistrate at once, if you like! Gibbet our names in the newspaper report, as a family connected by marriage with Mr. Sherwin the linen-draper's daughter, whom they believe to have disgraced herself as a woman and a wife for ever. Do your very worst; make public every shameful particular that you can--what advantage will you get by it? Revenge, I grant you. But will revenge put a halfpenny into your pocket? Will revenge pay a farthing towards your daughter's keep? Will revenge make us receive her? Not a bit of it! We shall be driven into a corner; we shall have no exposure to dread after you have exposed us; we shall have no remedy left, but a desperate remedy, and we'll go to law--boldly, openly go to law, and get a divorce. We have written evidence, which you know nothing about, and can call testimony which you cannot gag. I am no lawyer, but I'll bet you five hundred to one (quite in a friendly way, my dear Sir!) that we get our case. What follows? We send you back your daughter, without a shred of

character left to cover her; and we comfortably wash our hands of you altogether.'"

"Ralph! Ralph! how could you--"

"Stop! hear the end of it. Of course I knew that we couldn't carry out this divorce-threat, without its being the death of my father; but I thought a little quiet bullying on my part might do Mr. Shopkeeper Sherwin some good. And I was right. You never saw a man sit sorer on the sharp edges of a dilemma than he did. I stuck to my point in spite of everything; silence and money, or exposure and divorce--just which he pleased. 'I deny every one of your infamous imputations,' said he. 'That's not the question,' said I. 'I'll go to your father,' said he. 'You won't be let in,' said I. 'I'll write to him,' said he. 'He won't receive your letter,' said I. There we came to a pull-up. He began to stammer, and I refreshed myself with a pinch of snuff. Finding it wouldn't do, he threw off the Roman at last, and resumed the Tradesman. 'Even supposing I consented to this abominable compromise, what is to become of my daughter?' he asked. 'Just what becomes of other people who have comfortable annuities to live on,' I answered. 'Affection for my deeply-wronged child half inclines me to consult her wishes, before we settle anything--I'll go up-stairs,' said he. 'And I'll wait for you down here,' said I."

"Did he object to that?"

"Not he. He went up-stairs, and in a few minutes ran down again, with an open letter in his hand, looking as if the devil was after him before his time. At the last three or four stairs, he tripped, caught at the bannisters, dropped the letter over them in doing so, tumbled into the passage in such a fury and fright that he looked like a madman, tore his hat off a peg, and rushed out. I just heard him say his daughter should come back, if he put a straight waistcoat on her, as he passed the door. Between his tumble, his passion, and his hurry, he never thought of coming back for the letter he had dropped over the bannisters. I picked it up before I went away, suspecting it might be good evidence on our side; and I was right. Read it yourself; Basil; you have every moral and legal claim on the precious document--and here it is."

I took the letter, and read (in Mannion's handwriting) these words, dated from the hospital:--

"I have received your last note, and cannot wonder that you are getting

impatient under restraint. But, remember, that if you had not acted as I warned you beforehand to act in case of accidents--if you had not protested innocence to your father, and preserved total silence towards your mother; if you had not kept in close retirement, behaving like a domestic martyr, and avoiding, in your character of a victim, all voluntary mention of your husband's name--your position might have been a very awkward one. Not being able to help you, the only thing I could do was to teach you how to help yourself. I gave you the lesson, and you have been wise enough to profit by it.

"The time has now come for a change in my plans. I have suffered a relapse; and the date of my discharge from this place is still uncertain. I doubt the security, both on your account, and on mine, of still leaving you at your father's house, to await my cure. Come to me here, therefore, to-morrow, at any hour when you can get away unperceived. You will be let in as a visitor, and shown to my bedside, if you ask for Mr. Turner--the name I have given to the hospital authorities. Through the help of a friend outside these walls, I have arranged for a lodging in which you can live undiscovered, until I am discharged and can join you. You can come here twice a week, if you like, and you had better do so, to accustom yourself to the sight of my injuries. I told you in my first letter how and where they had been inflicted--when you see them with your own eyes, you will be best prepared to hear what my future purposes are, and how you can aid them.

"R. M."

This was evidently the letter about which I had been consulted by the servant at North Villa; the date corresponded with the date of Mannion's letter to me. I noticed that the envelope was missing, and asked Ralph whether he had got it.

"No," he replied; "Sherwin dropped the letter just in the state in which I have given it to you. I suspect the girl took away the envelope with her, thinking that the letter which she left behind her was inside. But the loss of the envelope doesn't matter. Look there: the fellow has written her name at the bottom of the leaf; as coolly as if it was an ordinary correspondence. She is identified with the letter, and that's all we want in our future dealings with her father."

"But, Ralph, do you think--"

"Do I think her father will get her back? If he's in time to catch her at the hospital, he assuredly will. If not, we shall have some little trouble on our

side, I suspect. This seems to me to be how the matter stands now, Basil:--After that letter, and her running away, Sherwin will have nothing for it but to hold his tongue about her innocence; we may consider him as settled and done with. As for the other rascal, Mannion, he certainly writes as if he meant to do something dangerous. If he really does attempt to annoy us, we will mark him again (I'll do it next time, by way of a little change!); he has no marriage certificate to shake over our heads, at any rate. What's the matter now?--you're looking pale again."

I felt that my colour was changing, while he spoke. There was something ominous in the contrast which, at that moment, I could not fail to draw between Mannion's enmity, as Ralph ignorantly estimated it, and as I really knew it. Already the first step towards the conspiracy with which I was threatened, had been taken by the departure of Sherwin's daughter from her father's house. Should I, at this earliest warning of coming events, show my brother the letter I had received from Mannion? No! such defence against the dangers threatened in it as Ralph would be sure to counsel, and to put in practice, might only include him in the life-long persecution which menaced me. When he repeated his remark about my sudden paleness, I merely accounted for it by some common-place excuse, and begged him to proceed.

"I suppose, Basil," he said, "the truth is, that you can't help being a little shocked--though you could expect nothing better from the girl--at her boldly following this fellow Mannion, even to the hospital" (Ralph was right; in spite of myself, this feeling was one among the many which now influenced me.) "Setting that aside, however, we are quite ready, I take it, to let her stick to her choice, and live just as she pleases, so long as she doesn't live under our name. There is the great fear and great difficulty now! If Sherwin can't find her, we must; otherwise, we can never feel certain that she is not incurring all sorts of debts as your wife. If her father gets her back, I shall be able to bring her to terms at North Villa; if not, I must get speech of her, wherever she happens to be hidden. She's the only thorn in our side now, and we must pull her out with gold pincers immediately. Don't you see that, Basil?"

"I see it, Ralph!"

"Very well. Either to-night or to-morrow morning, I'll communicate with Sherwin, and find out whether he has laid hands on her. If he hasn't, we must go to the hospital, and see what we can discover for ourselves. Don't look miserable and downhearted, Basil, I'll go with you: you needn't see her again, or the man either; but you must come with me, for I may be obliged to make use of you. And now, I'm off for to-day, in good earnest. I must get

back to Mrs. Ralph (unfortunately she happens to be one of the most sensitive women in the world), or she will be sending to advertise me in the newspapers. We shall pull through this, my dear fellow--you will see we shall! By the bye, you don't know of a nice little detached house in the Brompton neighbourhood, do you? Most of my old theatrical friends live about there--a detached house, mind! The fact is, I have taken to the violin lately (I wonder what I shall take to next?); Mrs. Ralph accompanies me on the pianoforte; and we might be an execrable nuisance to very near neighbours--that's all! You don't know of a house? Never mind; I can go to an agent, or something of that sort. Clara shall know to-night that we are moving prosperously, if I can only give the worthiest creature in the world the slip: she's a little obstinate, but, I assure you, a really superior woman. Only think of my dropping down to playing the fiddle, and paying rent and taxes in a suburban villa! How are the fast men fallen! Good bye, Basil, good bye!"

VII.

The next morning, Ralph never appeared--the day passed on, and I heard nothing--at last, when it was evening, a letter came from him.

The letter informed me that my brother had written to Mr. Sherwin, simply asking whether he had recovered his daughter. The answer to this question did not arrive till late in the day; and was in the negative--Mr. Sherwin had not found his daughter. She had left the hospital before he got there; and no one could tell him whither she had gone. His language and manner, as he himself admitted, had been so violent that he was not allowed to enter the ward where Mannion lay. When he returned home, he found his wife at the point of death; and on the same evening she expired. Ralph described his letter, as the letter of a man half out of his senses. He only mentioned his daughter, to declare, in terms almost of fury, that he would accuse her before his wife's surviving relatives, of having been the cause of her mother's death; and called down the most terrible denunciations on his own head, if he ever spoke to his child again, though he should see her starving before him in the streets. In a postscript, Ralph informed me that he would call the next morning, and concert measures for tracking Sherwin's daughter to her present retreat.

Every sentence in this letter bore warning of the crisis which was now close at hand; yet I had as little of the desire as of the power to prepare for it. A superstitious conviction that my actions were governed by a fatality which no human foresight could alter or avoid, began to strengthen within me. From this time forth, I awaited events with the uninquiring patience, the helpless resignation of despair.

My brother came, punctual to his appointment. When he proposed that I should at once accompany him to the hospital, I never hesitated at doing as he desired. We reached our destination; and Ralph approached the gates to make his first enquiries.

He was still speaking to the porter, when a gentleman advanced towards them, on his way out of the hospital. I saw him recognise my brother, and heard Ralph exclaim:

"Bernard! Jack Bernard! Have you come to England, of all the men in the world!"

"Why not?" was the answer. "I got every surgical testimonial the Hotel Dieu could give me, six months ago; and couldn't afford to stay in Paris only for my pleasure. Do you remember calling me a 'mute, inglorious Liston,' long ago, when we last met? Well, I have come to England to soar out of my obscurity and blaze into a shining light of the profession. Plenty of practice at the hospital, here--very little anywhere else, I am sorry to say."

"You don't mean that you belong to this hospital?"

"My dear fellow, I am regularly on the staff; I'm here every day of my life."

"You're the very man to enlighten us. Here, Basil, cross over, and let me introduce you to an old Paris friend of mine. Mr. Bernard--my brother. You've often heard me talk, Basil, of a younger son of old Sir William Bernard's, who preferred a cure of bodies to a cure of souls; and actually insisted on working in a hospital when he might have idled in a family living. This is the man--the best of doctors and good fellows."

"Are you bringing your brother to the hospital to follow my mad example?" asked Mr. Bernard, as he shook hands with me.

"Not exactly, Jack! But we really have an object in coming here. Can you give us ten minutes' talk, somewhere in private? We want to know about one of your patients."

He led us into an empty room, on the ground-floor of the building. "Leave the matter in my hands," whispered Ralph to me, as we sat down. "I'll find out everything."

"Now, Bernard," he said, "you have a man here, who calls himself Mr. Turner?"

"Are you a friend of that mysterious patient? Wonderful! The students call him 'The Great Mystery of London;' and I begin to think the students are right. Do you want to see him? When he has not got his green shade on, he's rather a startling sight, I can tell you, for unprofessional eyes."

"No, no--at least, not at present; my brother here, not at all. The fact is, certain circumstances have happened which oblige us to look after this man; and which I am sure you won't inquire into, when I tell you that it is our interest to keep them secret."

"Certainly not!"

"Then, without any more words about it, our object here, to-day, is to find out everything we can about Mr. Turner, and the people who have been to see him. Did a woman come, the day before yesterday?"

"Yes; and behaved rather oddly, I believe. I was not here when she came, but was told she asked for Turner, in a very agitated manner. She was directed to the Victoria Ward, where he is; and when she got there, looked excessively flurried and excited--seeing the Ward quite full, and, perhaps, not being used to hospitals. However it was, though the nurse pointed out the right bed to her, she ran in a mighty hurry to the wrong one."

"I understand," said Ralph; "just as some women run into the wrong omnibus, when the right one is straight before them."

"Exactly. Well, she only discovered her mistake (the room being rather dark), after she had stooped down close over the stranger, who was lying with his head away from her. By that time, the nurse was at her side, and led her to the right bed. There, I'm told, another scene happened. At sight of the patient's face, which is very frightfully disfigured, she was on the point (as the nurse thought) of going into a fit; but Turner stopped her in an instant. He just laid his hand on her arm, and whispered something to her; and, though she turned as pale as ashes, she was quiet directly. The next thing they say he did, was to give her a slip of paper, coolly directing her to go to the address written on it, and to come back to the hospital again, as soon as she could show a little more resolution. She went away at once--nobody knows where."

"Has nobody asked where?"

"Yes; a fellow who said he was her father, and who behaved like a madman. He came here about an hour after she had left, and wouldn't believe that we knew nothing about her (how the deuce should we know anything!) He threatened Turner (whom, by the bye, he called Manning, or some such name) in such an outrageous manner, that we were obliged to refuse him admission. Turner himself will give no information on the subject; but I suspect that his injuries are the result of a quarrel with the father about the daughter--a pretty savage quarrel, I must say, looking to the consequences--I beg your pardon, but your brother seems ill! I'm afraid," (turning to me), "you find the room rather close?"

"No, indeed; not at all. I have just recovered from a serious illness--but pray go on."

"I have very little more to say. The father went away in a fury, just as he came; the daughter has not yet made her appearance a second time. But, after what was reported to me of the first interview, I daresay she will come. She must, if she wants to see Turner; he won't be out, I suspect, for another fortnight. He has been making himself worse by perpetually writing letters; we were rather afraid of erysipelas, but he'll get over that danger, I think."

"About the woman," said Ralph; "it is of the greatest importance that we should know where she is now living. Is there any possibility (we will pay well for it) of getting some sharp fellow to follow her home from this place, the next time she comes here?"

Mr. Bernard hesitated a moment, and considered.

"I think I can manage it for you with the porter, after you are gone," he said, "provided you leave me free to give any remuneration I may think necessary."

"Anything in the world, my dear fellow. Have you got pen and ink? I'll write down my brother's address; you can communicate results to him, as soon as they occur."

While Mr. Bernard went to the opposite end of the room, in search of writing materials, Ralph whispered to me--

"If he wrote to my address, Mrs. Ralph might see the letter. She is the most amiable of her sex; but if written information of a woman's residence, directed to me, fell into her hands--you understand, Basil! Besides, it will be easy to let me know, the moment you hear from Jack. Look up, young one! It's all right--we are sailing with wind and tide."

Here Mr. Bernard brought us pen and ink. While Ralph was writing my address, his friend said to me:

"I hope you will not suspect me of wishing to intrude on your secrets, if (assuming your interest in Turner to be the reverse of a friendly interest) I warn you to look sharply after him when he leaves the hospital. Either there has been madness in his family, or his brain has suffered from his external injuries. Legally, he may be quite fit to be at large; for he will be able to maintain the appearance of perfect self-possession in all the ordinary affairs of life. But, morally, I am convinced that he is a dangerous monomaniac; his mania being connected with some fixed idea which evidently never leaves

him day or night. I would lay a heavy wager that he dies in a prison or a madhouse."

"And I'll lay another wager, if he's mad enough to annoy us, that we are the people to shut him up," said Ralph. "There is the address. And now, we needn't waste your time any longer. I have taken a little place at Brompton, Jack,--you and Basil must come and dine with me, as soon as the carpets are down."

We left the room. As we crossed the hall, a gentleman came forward, and spoke to Mr. Bernard.

"That man's fever in the Victoria Ward has declared itself at last," he said. "This morning the new symptoms have appeared."

"And what do they indicate?"

"Typhus of the most malignant character--not a doubt of it. Come up, and look at him."

I saw Mr. Bernard start, and glance quickly at my brother. Ralph fixed his eyes searchingly on his friend's face; exclaimed: "Victoria Ward! why you mentioned that--;" and then stopped, with a very strange and sudden alteration in his expression. The next moment he drew Mr. Bernard aside, saying: "I want to ask you whether the bed in Victoria Ward, occupied by this man whose fever has turned to typhus, is the same bed, or near the bed which--" The rest of the sentence was lost to me as they walked away.

After talking together in whispers for a few moments, they rejoined me. Mr. Bernard was explaining the different theories of infection to Ralph.

"My notion," he said, "is, that infection is taken through the lungs; one breath inhaled from the infected atmosphere hanging immediately around the diseased person, and generally extending about a foot from him, being enough to communicate his malady to the breather--provided there exists, at the time, in the individual exposed to catch the malady, a constitutional predisposition to infection. This predisposition we know to be greatly increased by mental agitation, or bodily weakness; but, in the case we have been talking of," (he looked at me,) "the chances of infection or non-infection may be equally balanced. At any rate, I can predict nothing about them at this stage of the discovery."

"You will write the moment you hear anything?" said Ralph, shaking hands

with him.

"The very moment. I have your brother's address safe in my pocket."

We separated. Ralph was unusually silent and serious on our way back. He took leave of me at the door of my lodging, very abruptly; without referring again to our visit to the hospital.

A week passed away, and I heard nothing from Mr. Bernard. During this interval, I saw little of my brother; he was occupied in moving into his new house. Towards the latter part of the week, he came to inform me that he was about to leave London for a few days. My father had asked him to go to the family house, in the country, on business connected with the local management of the estates. Ralph still retained all his old dislike of the steward's accounts and the lawyer's consultations; but he felt bound, out of gratitude for my father's special kindness to him since his return to England, to put a constraint on his own inclinations, and go to the country as he was desired. He did not expect to be absent more than two or three days; but earnestly charged me to write to him, if I had any news from the hospital while he was away.

During the week, Clara came twice to see me--escaping from home by stealth, as before. On each occasion, she showed the same affectionate anxiety to set me an example of cheerfulness, and to sustain me in hope. I saw, with a sorrow and apprehension which I could not altogether conceal from her, that the weary look in her face had never changed, never diminished since I had first observed it. Ralph had, from motives of delicacy, avoided increasing the hidden anxieties which were but too evidently preying upon her health, by keeping her in perfect ignorance of our visit to the hospital, and, indeed, of the particulars of all our proceedings since his return. I took care to preserve the same secrecy, during her short interviews with me. She bade me farewell after her third visit, with a sadness which she vainly endeavoured to hide. I little thought, then, that the tones of her sweet, clear voice had fallen on my ear for the last time, before I wandered to the far West of England where I now write.

At the end of the week--it was on a Saturday, I remember--I left my lodgings early in the morning, to go into the country; with no intention of returning before evening. I had felt a sense of oppression, on rising, which was almost unendurable. The perspiration stood thick on my forehead, though the day was not unusually hot; the air of London grew harder and harder to breathe, with every minute; my heart felt tightened to bursting; my temples throbbed with fever-fury; my very life seemed to depend on escaping into pure air, into

some place where there was shade from trees, and water that ran cool and refreshing to look on. So I set forth, careless in what direction I went; and remained in the country all day. Evening was changing into night as I got back to London.

I inquired of the servant at my lodging, when she let me in, whether any letter had arrived for me. She answered, that one had come just after I had gone out in the morning, and that it was lying on my table. My first glance at it, showed me Mr. Bernard's name written in the corner of the envelope. I eagerly opened the letter, and read these words:

"Private.

"Friday.

"My DEAR SIR,

"On the enclosed slip of paper you will find the address of the young woman, of whom your brother spoke to me when we met at the hospital. I regret to say, that the circumstances under which I have obtained information of her residence, are of the most melancholy nature.

"The plan which I arranged for discovering her abode, in accordance with your brother's suggestion, proved useless. The young woman never came to the hospital a second time. Her address was given to me this morning, by Turner himself; who begged that I would visit her professionally, as he had no confidence in the medical man who was then in attendance on her. Many circumstances combined to make my compliance with his request anything but easy or desirable; but knowing that you--or your brother I ought, perhaps, rather to say--were interested in the young woman, I determined to take the very earliest opportunity of seeing her, and consulting with her medical attendant. I could not get to her till late in the afternoon. When I arrived, I found her suffering from one of the worst attacks of Typhus I ever remember to have seen; and I think it my duty to state candidly, that I believe her life to be in imminent danger. At the same time, it is right to inform you that the gentleman in attendance on her does not share my opinion: he still thinks there is a good chance of saving her.

"There can be no doubt whatever, that she was infected with Typhus at the hospital. You may remember my telling you, how her agitation appeared to have deprived her of self-possession, when she entered the ward; and how

she ran to the wrong bed, before the nurse could stop her. The man whom she thus mistook for Turner, was suffering from fever which had not then specifically declared itself; but which did so declare itself, as a Typhus fever, on the morning when you and your brother came to the hospital. This man's disorder must have been infectious when the young woman stooped down close over him, under the impression that he was the person she had come to see. Although she started back at once, on discovering her mistake, she had breathed the infection into her system--her mental agitation at the time, accompanied (as I have since understood) by some physical weakness, rendering her specially liable to the danger to which she had accidentally exposed herself.

"Since the first symptoms of her disease appeared, on Saturday last, I cannot find that any error has been committed in the medical treatment, as reported to me. I remained some time by her bedside to-day, observing her. The delirium which is, more or less, an invariable result of Typhus, is particularly marked in her case, and manifests itself both by speech and gesture. It has been found impossible to quiet her, by any means hitherto tried. While I was watching by her, she never ceased calling on your name, and entreating to see you. I am informed by her medical attendant, that her wanderings have almost invariably taken this direction for the last four-and-twenty hours. Occasionally she mixes other names with yours, and mentions them in terms of abhorrence; but her persistency in calling for your presence, is so remarkable that I am tempted, merely from what I have heard myself; to suggest that you really should go to her, on the bare chance that you might exercise some tranquillising influence. At the same time, if you fear infection, or for any private reasons (into which I have neither the right nor the wish to inquire) feel unwilling to take the course I have pointed out, do not by any means consider it your duty to accede to my proposal. I can conscientiously assure you that duty is not involved in it.

"I have, however, another suggestion to make, which is of a positive nature, and which I am sure will meet with your approval. It is, that her parents, or some of her other relations, if her parents are not alive, should be informed of her situation. Possibly, you may know something of her connections, and can therefore do this good office. She is dying in a strange place, among people who avoid her as they would avoid a pestilence. Even though it be only to bury her, some relation ought to be immediately summoned to her bed-side.

"I shall visit her twice to-morrow, in the morning and at night. If you are not willing to risk seeing her (and I repeat that it is in no sense imperative that you should combat such unwillingness), perhaps you will communicate with

me at my private address.

"I remain, dear Sir,

"Faithfully yours,

"JOHN BERNARD.

"P. S.--I open my letter again, to inform you that Turner, acting against all advice, has left the hospital to-day. He attempted to go on Tuesday last, when, I believe, he first received information of the young woman's serious illness, but was seized with a violent attack of giddiness, on attempting to walk, and fell down just outside the door of the ward. On this second occasion, however, he has succeeded in getting away without any accident--as far, at least, as the persons employed about the hospital can tell."

When the letter fell from my trembling hand, when I first asked of my own heart the fearful question:--"Have I, to whom the mere thought of ever seeing this woman again has been as a pollution to shrink from, the strength to stand by her death-bed, the courage to see her die?"--then, and not till then, did I really know how suffering had fortified, while it had humbled me; how affliction has the power to purify, as well as to pain.

All bitter memory of the ill that she had done me, of the misery I had suffered at her hands, lost its hold on my mind. Once more, her mother's last words of earthly lament--"Oh, who will pray for her when I am gone!" seemed to be murmuring in my ear--murmuring in harmony with the divine words in which the Voice from the Mount of Olives taught forgiveness of injuries to all mankind.

She was dying: dying among strangers in the pining madness of fever--and the one being of all who knew her, whose presence at her bedside might yet bring calmness to her last moments, and give her quietly and tenderly to death, was the man whom she had pitilessly deceived and dishonoured, whose youth she had ruined, whose hopes she had wrecked for ever. Strangely had destiny brought us together--terribly had it separated us--awfully would it now unite us again, at the end!

What were my wrongs, heavy as they had been; what my sufferings, poignant as they still were, that they should stand between this dying woman, and the last hope of awakening her to the consciousness that she

was going before the throne of God? The sole resource for her which human skill and human pity could now suggest, embraced the sole chance that she might still be recovered for repentance, before she was resigned to death. How did I know, but that in those ceaseless cries which had uttered my name, there spoke the last earthly anguish of the tortured spirit, calling upon me for one drop of water to cool its burning guilt--one drop from the waters of Peace?

I took up Mr. Bernard's letter from the floor on which it had fallen, and re-directed it to my brother; simply writing on a blank place in the inside, "I have gone to soothe her last moments." Before I departed, I wrote to her father, and summoned him to her bedside. The guilt of his absence--if his heartless and hardened nature did not change towards her--would now rest with him, and not with me. I forbore from thinking how he would answer my letter; for I remembered his written words to my brother, declaring that he would accuse his daughter of having caused her mother's death; and I suspected him even then, of wishing to shift the shame of his conduct towards his unhappy wife from himself to his child.

After writing this second letter, I set forth instantly for the house to which Mr. Bernard had directed me. No thought of myself; no thought, even, of the peril suggested by the ominous disclosure about Mannion, in the postscript to the surgeon's letter, ever crossed my mind. In the great stillness, in the heavenly serenity that had come to my spirit, the wasting fire of every sensation which was only of this world, seemed quenched for ever.

It was eleven o'clock when I arrived at the house. A slatternly, sulky woman opened the door to me. "Oh! I suppose you're another doctor," she muttered, staring at me with scowling eyes. "I wish you were the undertaker, to get her out of my house before we all catch our deaths of her! There! there's the other doctor coming down stairs; he'll show you the room--I won't go near it."

As I took the candle from her hand, I saw that Mr. Bernard was approaching me from the stairs.

"You can do no good, I am afraid," he said, "but I am glad you have come."

"There is no hope, then?"

"In my opinion, none. Turner came here this morning, whether she recognised him, or not, in her delirium, I cannot say; but she grew so much worse in his presence, that I insisted on his not seeing her again, except

under medical permission. Just now, there is no one in the room--are you willing to go up stairs at once?"

"Does she still speak of me in her wanderings?"

"Yes, as incessantly as ever."

"Then I am ready to go to her bedside."

"Pray believe that I feel deeply what a sacrifice you are making. Since I wrote to you, much that she has said in her delirium has told me"--(he hesitated)--"has told me more, I am afraid, than you would wish me to have known, as a comparative stranger to you. I will only say, that secrets unconsciously disclosed on the death-bed are secrets sacred to me, as they are to all who pursue my calling; and that what I have unavoidably heard above stairs, is doubly sacred in my estimation, as affecting a near and dear relative of one of my oldest friends." He paused, and took my hand very kindly; then added: "I am sure you will think yourself rewarded for any trial to your feelings to-night, if you can only remember in years to come, that your presence quieted her in her last moments!"

I felt his sympathy and delicacy too strongly to thank him in words; I could only look my gratitude as he asked me to follow him up stairs.

We entered the room softly. Once more, and for the last time in this world, I stood in the presence of Margaret Sherwin.

Not even to see her, as I had last seen her, was such a sight of misery as to behold her now, forsaken on her deathbed, to look at her, as she lay with her head turned from me, fretfully covering and uncovering her face with the loose tresses of her long black hair, and muttering my name incessantly in her fever-dream: "Basil! Basil! Basil! I'll never leave off calling for him, till he comes. Basil! Basil! Where is he? Oh, where, where, where!"

"He is here," said the doctor, taking the candle from my hand, and holding it, so that the light fell full on my face. "Look at her and speak to her as usual, when she turns round," he whispered to me.

Still she never moved; still those hoarse, fierce, quick tones--that voice, once the music that my heart beat to; now the discord that it writhed under--muttered faster and faster: "Basil! Basil! Bring him here! bring me Basil!"

"He is here," repeated Mr. Bernard loudly. "Look! look up at him!"

She turned in an instant, and tore the hair back from her face. For a moment, I forced myself to look at her; for a moment, I confronted the smouldering fever in her cheeks; the glare of the bloodshot eyes; the distortion of the parched lips; the hideous clutching of the outstretched fingers at the empty air--but the agony of that sight was more than I could endure: I turned away my head, and hid my face in horror.

"Compose yourself," whispered the doctor. "Now she is quiet, speak to her; speak to her before she begins again; call her by her name."

Her name! Could my lips utter it at such a moment as this?

"Quick! quick!" cried Mr. Bernard. "Try her while you have the chance."

I struggled against the memories of the past, and spoke to her--God knows as gently, if not as happily, as in the bygone time!

"Margaret," I said, "Margaret, you asked for me, and I have come."

She tossed her arms above her head with a shrill scream, frightfully prolonged till it ended in low moanings and murmurings; then turned her face from us again, and pulled her hair over it once more.

"I am afraid she is too far gone," said the doctor; "but make another trial."

"Margaret," I said again, "have you forgotten me? Margaret!"

She looked at me once more. This time, her dry, dull eyes seemed to soften, and her fingers twined themselves less passionately in her hair. She began to laugh--a low, vacant, terrible laugh.

"Yes, yes," she said, "I know he's come at last; I can make him do anything. Get me my bonnet and shawl; any shawl will do, but a mourning shawl is best, because we are going to the funeral of our wedding. Come, Basil! let's go back to the church, and get unmarried again; that's what I wanted you for. We don't care about each other. Robert Mannion wants me more than you do--he's not ashamed of me because my father's a tradesman; he won't make believe that he's in love with me, and then marry me to spite the pride of his family. Come! I'll tell the clergyman to read the service backwards; that makes a marriage no marriage at all, everybody knows."

As the last wild words escaped her, some one below stairs called to Mr.

Bernard. He went out for a minute, then returned again, telling me that he was summoned to a case of sudden illness which he must attend without a moment's delay.

"The medical man whom I found here when I first came," he said, "was sent for this evening into the country, to be consulted about an operation, I believe. But if anything happens, I shall be at your service. There is the address of the house to which I am now going" (he wrote it down on a card); "you can send, if you want me. I will get back, however, as soon as possible, and see her again; she seems to be a little quieter already, and may become quieter still, if you stay longer. The night-nurse is below--I will send her up as I go downstairs. Keep the room well ventilated, the windows open as they are now. Don't breathe too close to her, and you need fear no infection. Look! her eyes are still fixed on you. This is the first time I have seen her look in the same direction for two minutes together; one would think she really recognised you. Wait till I come back, if you possibly can--I won't be a moment longer than I can help."

He hastily left the room. I turned to the bed, and saw that she was still looking at me. She had never ceased murmuring to herself while Mr. Bernard was speaking; and she did not stop when the nurse came in.

The first sight of this woman, on her entrance, sickened and shocked me. All that was naturally repulsive in her, was made doubly revolting by the characteristics of the habitual drunkard, lowering and glaring at me in her purple, bloated face. To see her heavy hands shaking at the pillow, as they tried mechanically to arrange it; to see her stand, alternately leering and scowling by the bedside, an incarnate blasphemy in the sacred chamber of death, was to behold the most horrible of all mockeries, the most impious of all profanations. No loneliness in the presence of mortal agony could try me to the quick, as the sight of that foul old age of degradation and debauchery, defiling the sick room, now tried me. I determined to wait alone by the bedside till Mr. Bernard returned.

With some difficulty, I made the wretched drunkard understand that she might go downstairs again; and that I would call her if she was wanted. At last, she comprehended my meaning, and slowly quitted the room. The door closed on her; and I was left alone to watch the last moments of the woman who had ruined me!

As I sat down near the open window, the sounds outside in the street told of the waning of the night. There was an echo of many footsteps, a hoarse murmur of conflicting voices, now near, now afar off. The public houses

were dispersing their drunken crowds--the crowds of a Saturday night: it was twelve o'clock.

Through those street-sounds of fierce ribaldry and ghastly mirth, the voice of the dying woman penetrated, speaking more slowly, more distinctly, more terribly than it had spoken yet.

"I see him," she said, staring vacantly at me, and moving her hands slowly to and fro in the air. "I see him! But he's a long way off; he can't hear our secrets, and he does not suspect you as mother does. Don't tell me that about him any more; my flesh creeps at it! What are you looking at me in that way for? You make me feel on fire. You know I like you, because I must like you; because I can't help it. It's no use saying hush: I tell you he can't hear us, and can't see us. He can see nothing; you make a fool of him, and I make a fool of him. But mind! I will ride in my own carriage: you must keep things secret enough to let me do that. I say I will ride in my carriage: and I'll go where father walks to business: I don't care if I splash him with my carriage wheels! I'll be even with him for some of the passions he's been in with me. You see how I'll go into our shop and order dresses! (be quiet! I say he can't hear us). I'll have velvet where his sister has silk, and silk where she has muslin: I'm a finer girl than she is, and I'll be better dressed. Tell him anything, indeed! What have I ever let out? It's not so easy always to make believe I'm in love with him, after what you have told me. Suppose he found us out?--Rash? I'm no more rash than you are! Why didn't you come back from France in time, and stop it all? Why did you let me marry him? A nice wife I've been to him, and a nice husband he has been to me--a husband who waits a year! Ha! ha! he calls himself a man, doesn't he? A husband who waits a year!"

I approached nearer to the bedside, and spoke to her again, in the hope to win her tenderly towards dreaming of better things. I know not whether she heard me, but her wild thoughts changed--changed darkly to later events.

"Beds! beds!" she cried, "beds everywhere, with dying men on them! And one bed the most terrible of all--look at it! The deformed face, with the white of the pillow all round it! His face? his face, that hadn't a fault in it? Never! It's the face of a devil; the finger-nails of the devil are on it! Take me away! drag me out! I can't move for that face: it's always before me: it's walling me up among the beds: it's burning me all over. Water! water! drown me in the sea; drown me deep, away from the burning face!"

"Hush, Margaret! hush! drink this, and you will be cool again." I gave her some lemonade, which stood by the bedside.

"Yes, yes; hush, as you say. Where's Robert? Robert Mannion? Not here! then I've got a secret for you. When you go home to-night, Basil, and say your prayers, pray for a storm of thunder and lightning; and pray that I may be struck dead in it, and Robert too. It's a fortnight to my aunt's party; and in a fortnight you'll wish us both dead, so you had better pray for what I tell you in time. We shall make handsome corpses. Put roses into my coffin--scarlet roses, if you can find any, because that stands for Scarlet Woman--in the Bible, you know. Scarlet? What do I care! It's the boldest colour in the world. Robert will tell you, and all your family, how many women are as scarlet as I am--virtue wears it at home, in secret; and vice wears it abroad, in public: that's the only difference, he says. Scarlet roses! scarlet roses! throw them into the coffin by hundreds; smother me up in them; bury me down deep; in the dark, quiet street--where there's a broad door-step in front of a house, and a white, wild face, something like Basil's, that's always staring on the doorstep awfully. Oh, why did I meet him! why did I marry him! oh, why! why!"

She uttered the last words in slow, measured cadence--the horrible mockery of a chaunt which she used to play to us at North Villa, on Sunday evenings. Then her voice sank again; her articulation thickened, and grew indistinct. It was like the change from darkness to daylight, in the sight of sleepless eyes, to hear her only murmuring now, after hearing her last terrible words.

The weary night-time passed on. Longer and longer grew the intervals of silence between the scattered noises from the streets; less and less frequent were the sounds of distant carriage-wheels, and the echoing rapid footsteps of late pleasure-seekers hurrying home. At last, the heavy tramp of the policeman going his rounds, alone disturbed the silence of the early morning hours. Still, the voice from the bed muttered incessantly; but now, in drowsy, languid tones: still, Mr. Bernard did not return: still the father of the dying girl never came, never obeyed the letter which summoned him for the last time to her side.

(There was yet one more among the absent--one from whose approach the death-bed must be kept sacred; one, whose evil presence was to be dreaded as a pestilence and a scourge. Mannion!--where was Mannion?)

I sat by the window, resigned to wait in loneliness till the end came, watching mechanically the vacant eyes that ever watched me--when, suddenly, the face of Margaret seemed to fade out of my sight. I started and looked round. The candle, which I had placed at the opposite end of the room, had burnt down without my noticing it, and was now expiring in the

socket. I ran to light the fresh candle which lay on the table by its side, but was too late. The wick flickered its last; the room was left in darkness.

While I felt among the different objects under my hands for a box of matches: Margaret's voice strengthened again.

"Innocent! innocent!" I heard her cry mournfully through the darkness. "I'll swear I'm innocent, and father is sure to swear it too. Innocent Margaret! Oh, me! what innocence!"

She repeated these words over and over again, till the hearing them seemed to bewilder all my senses. I hardly knew what I touched. Suddenly, my searching hands stopped of themselves, I could not tell why. Was there some change in the room? Was there more air in it, as if a door had been opened? Was there something moving over the floor? Had Margaret left her bed?--No! the mournful voice was speaking unintermittingly, and speaking from the same distance.

I moved to search for the matches on a chest of drawers, which stood near the window. Though the morning was at its darkest, and the house stood midway between two gas-lamps, there was a glimmering of light in this place. I looked back into the room from the window, and thought I saw something shadowy moving near the bed. "Take him away!" I heard Margaret scream in her wildest tones. "His hands are on me: he's feeling my face, to feel if I'm dead!"

I ran to her, striking against some piece of furniture in the darkness. Something passed swiftly between me and the bed, as I got near it. I thought I heard a door close. Then there was silence for a moment; and then, as I stretched out my hands, my right hand encountered the little table placed by Margaret's side, and the next moment I felt the match-box that had been left on it.

As I struck a light, her voice repeated close at my ear:

"His hands are on me: he's feeling my face to feel if I'm dead!"

The match flared up. As I carried it to the candle, I looked round, and noticed for the first time that there was a second door, at the further corner of the room, which lighted some inner apartment through glass panes at the top. When I tried this door, it was locked on the inside, and the room beyond was dark.

Dark and silent. But was no one there, hidden in that darkness and silence? Was there any doubt now, that stealthy feet had approached Margaret, that stealthy hands had touched her, while the room was in obscurity?--Doubt? There was none on that point, none on any other. Suspicion shaped itself into conviction in an instant, and identified the stranger who had passed in the darkness between me and the bedside, with the man whose presence I had dreaded, as the presence of an evil spirit in the chamber of death.

He was waiting secretly in the house--waiting for her last moments; listening for her last words; watching his opportunity, perhaps, to enter the room again, and openly profane it by his presence! I placed myself by the door, resolved, if he approached, to thrust him back, at any hazard, from the bedside. How long I remained absorbed in watching before the darkness of the inner room, I know not--but some time must have elapsed before the silence around me forced itself suddenly on my attention. I turned towards Margaret; and, in an instant, all previous thoughts were suspended in my mind, by the sight that now met my eyes.

She had altered completely. Her hands, so restless hitherto, lay quite still over the coverlid; her lips never moved; the whole expression of her face had changed--the fever-traces remained on every feature, and yet the fever-look was gone. Her eyes were almost closed; her quick breathing had grown calm and slow. I touched her pulse; it was beating with a wayward, fluttering gentleness. What did this striking alteration indicate? Recovery? Was it possible? As the idea crossed my mind, every one of my faculties became absorbed in the sole occupation of watching her face; I could not have stirred an instant from the bed, for worlds.

The earliest dawn of day was glimmering faintly at the window, before another change appeared--before she drew a long, sighing breath, and slowly opened her eyes on mine. Their first look was very strange and startling to behold; for it was the look that was natural to her; the calm look of consciousness, restored to what it had always been in the past time. It lasted only for a moment. She recognised me; and, instantly, an expression of anguish and shame flew over the first terror and surprise of her face. She struggled vainly to lift her hands--so busy all through the night; so idle now! A faint moan of supplication breathed from her lips; and she slowly turned her head on the pillow, so as to hide her face from my sight.

"Oh, my God! my God!" she murmured, in low, wailing tones, "I've broken his heart, and he still comes here to be kind to me! This is worse than death! I'm too bad to be forgiven--leave me! leave me!--oh, Basil, leave me to die!"

I spoke to her; but desisted almost immediately--desisted even from uttering her name. At the mere sound of my voice, her suffering rose to agony; the wild despair of the soul wrestling awfully with the writhing weakness of the body, uttered itself in words and cries horrible, beyond all imagination, to hear. I sank down on my knees by the bedside; the strength which had sustained me for hours, gave way in an instant, and I burst into a passion of tears, as my spirit poured from my lips in supplication for hers--tears that did not humiliate me; for I knew, while I shed them, that I had forgiven her!

The dawn brightened. Gradually, as the fair light of the new day flowed in lovely upon her bed; as the fresh morning breeze lifted tenderly and playfully the scattered locks of her hair that lay over the pillow--so, the calmness began to come back to her voice and the stillness of repose to her limbs. But she never turned her face to me again; never, when the wild words of her despair grew fewer and fainter; never, when the last faint supplication to me, to leave her to die forsaken as she deserved, ended mournfully in a long, moaning gasp for breath. I waited after this--waited a long time--then spoke to her softly--then waited once more; hearing her still breathe, but slowly and more slowly with every minute--then spoke to her for the second time, louder than before. She never answered, and never moved. Was she sleeping? I could not tell. Some influence seemed to hold me back from going to the other side of the bed, to look at her face, as it lay away from me, almost hidden in the pillow.

The light strengthened faster, and grew mellow with the clear beauty of the morning sunshine. I heard the sound of rapid footsteps advancing along the street; they stopped under the window: and a voice which I recognized, called me by my name. I looked out: Mr. Bernard had returned at last.

"I could not get back sooner," he said; "the case was desperate, and I was afraid to leave it. You will find a key on the chimney-piece--throw it out to me, and I can let myself in; I told them not to bolt the door before I went out."

I obeyed his directions. When he entered the room, I thought Margaret moved a little, and signed to him with my hand to make no noise. He looked towards the bed without any appearance of surprise, and asked me in a whisper when the change had come over her, and how. I told him very briefly, and inquired whether he had known of such changes in other cases, like hers.

"Many," he answered, "many changes just as extraordinary, which have raised hopes that I never knew realised. Expect the worst from the change

you have witnessed; it is a fatal sign."

Still, in spite of what he said, it seemed as if he feared to wake her; for he spoke in his lowest tones, and walked very softly when he went close to the bedside.

He stopped suddenly, just as he was about to feel her pulse, and looked in the direction of the glass door--listened attentively--and said, as if to himself--"I thought I heard some one moving in that room, but I suppose I am mistaken; nobody can be up in the house yet." With those words he looked down at Margaret, and gently parted back her hair from her forehead.

"Don't disturb her," I whispered, "she is asleep; surely she is asleep!"

He paused before he answered me, and placed his hand on her heart. Then softly drew up the bed-linen, till it hid her face.

"Yes, she is asleep," he said gravely; "asleep, never to wake again. She is dead."

I turned aside my head in silence, for my thoughts, at that moment, were not the thoughts which can be spoken by man to man.

"This has been a sad scene for any one at your age," he resumed kindly, as he left the bedside, "but you have borne it well. I am glad to see that you can behave so calmly under so hard a trial."

Calmly?

Yes! at that moment it was fit that I should be calm; for I could remember that I had forgiven her.

VIII.

On the fourth day from the morning when she had died, I stood alone in the churchyard by the grave of Margaret Sherwin.

It had been left for me to watch her dying moments; it was left for me to bestow on her remains the last human charity which the living can extend to the dead. If I could have looked into the future on our fatal marriage-day, and could have known that the only home of my giving which she would ever inhabit, would be the home of the grave!--

Her father had written me a letter, which I destroyed at the time; and which, if I had it now, I should forbear from copying into these pages. Let it be enough for me to relate here, that he never forgave the action by which she thwarted him in his mercenary designs upon me and upon my family; that he diverted from himself the suspicion and disgust of his wife's surviving relatives (whose hostility he had some pecuniary reasons to fear), by accusing his daughter, as he had declared he would accuse her, of having been the real cause of her mother's death; and that he took care to give the appearance of sincerity to the indignation which he professed to feel against her, by refusing to follow her remains to the place of burial.

Ralph had returned to London, as soon as he received the letter from Mr. Bernard which I had forwarded to him. He offered me his assistance in performing the last duties left to my care, with an affectionate earnestness that I had never seen him display towards me before. But Mr. Bernard had generously undertaken to relieve me of every responsibility which could be assumed by others; and on this occasion, therefore, I had no need to put my brother's ready kindness in helping me to the test.

I stood alone by the grave. Mr. Bernard had taken leave of me; the workers and the idlers in the churchyard had alike departed. There was no reason why I should not follow them; and yet I remained, with my eyes fixed upon the freshly-turned earth at my feet, thinking of the dead.

Some time had passed thus, when the sound of approaching footsteps attracted my attention. I looked up, and saw a man, clothed in a long cloak drawn loosely around his neck, and wearing a shade over his eyes, which hid the whole upper part of his face, advancing slowly towards me, walking with the help of a stick. He came on straight to the grave, and stopped at the foot of it--stopped opposite me, as I stood at the head.

"Do you know me again?" he said. "Do you know me for Robert Mannion?" As he pronounced his name, he raised the shade and looked at me.

The first sight of that appalling face, with its ghastly discolouration of sickness, its hideous deformity of feature, its fierce and changeless malignity of expression glaring full on me in the piercing noonday sunshine--glaring with the same unearthly look of fury and triumph which I had seen flashing through the flashing lightning, when I parted from him on the night of the storm--struck me speechless where I stood, and has never left me since. I must not, I dare not, describe that frightful sight; though it now rises before my imagination, vivid in its horror as on the first day when I saw it--though it moves hither and thither before me fearfully, while I write; though it lowers at my window, a noisome shadow on the radiant prospect of earth, and sea, and sky, whenever I look up from the page I am now writing towards the beauties of my cottage view.

"Do you know me for Robert Mannion?" he repeated. "Do you know the work of your own hands, now you see it? Or, am I changed to you past recognition, as your father might have found my father changed, if he had seen him on the morning of his execution, standing under the gallows, with the cap over his face?"

Still I could neither speak nor move. I could only look away from him in horror, and fix my eyes on the ground.

He lowered the shade to its former position on his face, then spoke again.

"Under this earth that we stand on," he said, setting his foot on the grave; "down here, where you are now looking, lies buried with the buried dead, the last influence which might one day have gained you respite and mercy at my hands. Did you think of the one, last chance that you were losing, when you came to see her die? I watched you, and I watched her. I heard as much as you heard; I saw as much as you saw; I know when she died, and how, as you know it; I shared her last moments with you, to the very end. It was my fancy not to give her up, as your sole possession, even on her death-bed: it is my fancy, now, not to let you stand alone--as if her corpse was your property--over her grave!"

While he uttered the last words, I felt my self-possession returning. I could not force myself to speak, as I would fain have spoken--I could only move away, to leave him.

"Stop," he said, "what I have still to say concerns you. I have to tell you, face to face, standing with you here, over her dead body, that what I wrote from the hospital, is what I will do; that I will make your whole life to come, one long expiation of this deformity;" (he pointed to his face), "and of that death" (he set his foot once more on the grave). "Go where you will, this face of mine shall never be turned away from you; this tongue, which you can never silence but by a crime, shall awaken against you the sleeping superstitions and cruelties of all mankind. The noisome secret of that night when you followed us, shall reek up like a pestilence in the nostrils of your fellow-beings, be they whom they may. You may shield yourself behind your family and your friends--I will strike at you through the dearest and the bravest of them! Now you have heard me, go! The next time we meet, you shall acknowledge with your own lips that I can act as I speak. Live the free life which Margaret Sherwin has restored to you by her death--you will know it soon for the life of Cain!"

He turned from the grave, and left me by the way that he had come; but the hideous image of him, and the remembrance of the words he had spoken, never left me. Never for a moment, while I lingered alone in the churchyard; never, when I quitted it, and walked through the crowded streets. The horror of the fiend-face was still before my eyes, the poison of the fiend-words was still in my ears, when I returned to my lodging, and found Ralph waiting to see me as soon as I entered my room.

"At last you have come back!" he said; "I was determined to stop till you did, if I stayed all day. Is anything the matter? Have you got into some worse difficulty than ever?"

"No, Ralph--no. What have you to tell me?"

"Something that will rather surprise you, Basil: I have to tell you to leave London at once! Leave it for your own interests and for everybody else's. My father has found out that Clara has been to see you."

"Good heavens! how?"

"He won't tell me. But he has found it out. You know how you stand in his opinion--I leave you to imagine what he thinks of Clara's conduct in coming here."

"No! no! tell me yourself, Ralph--tell me how she bears his displeasure!"

"As badly as possible. After having forbidden her ever to enter this house

again, he now only shows how he is offended, by his silence; and it is exactly that, of course, which distresses her. Between her notions of implicit obedience to him, and her opposite notions, just as strong, of her sisterly duties to you, she is made miserable from morning to night. What she will end in, if things go on like this, I am really afraid to think; and I'm not easily frightened, as you know. Now, Basil, listen to me: it is your business to stop this, and my business to tell you how."

"I will do anything you wish--anything for Clara's sake!"

"Then leave London; and so cut short the struggle between her duty and her inclination. If you don't, my father is quite capable of taking her at once into the country, though I know he has important business to keep him in London. Write a letter to her, saying that you have gone away for your health, for change of scene and peace of mind--gone away, in short, to come back better some day. Don't say where you're going, and don't tell me, for she is sure to ask, and sure to get it out of me if I know. Then she might be writing to you, and that might be found out, too. She can't distress herself about your absence, if you account for it properly, as she distresses herself now--that is one consideration. And you will serve your own interests, as well as Clara's, by going away--that is another."

"Never mind my interests. Clara! I can only think of Clara!"

"But you have interests, and you must think of them. I told my father of the death of that unhappy woman, and of your noble behaviour when she was dying. Don't interrupt me, Basil--it was noble; I couldn't have done what you did, I can tell you! I saw he was more struck by it than he was willing to confess. An impression has been made on him by the turn circumstances have taken. Only leave that impression to strengthen, and you're safe. But if you destroy it by staying here, after what has happened, and keeping Clara in this new dilemma--my dear fellow, you destroy your best chance! There is a sort of defiance of him in stopping; there is a downright concession to him in going away."

"I will go, Ralph; you have more than convinced me that I ought! I will go to-morrow, though where--"

"You have the rest of the day to think where. I should go abroad and amuse myself; but your ideas of amusement are, most likely, not mine. At any rate, wherever you go, I can always supply you with money, when you want it; you can write to me, after you have been away some little time, and I can write back, as soon as I have good news to tell you. Only stick to your

present determination, Basil, and, I'll answer for it, you will be back in your own study at home, before you are many months older!"

"I will put it out of my power to fail in my resolution, by writing to Clara at once, and giving you the letter to place in her hands to-morrow evening, when I shall have left London some hours."

"That's right, Basil! that's acting and speaking like a man!"

I wrote immediately, accounting for my sudden absence as Ralph had advised me--wrote, with a heavy heart, all that I thought would be most reassuring and cheering to Clara; and then, without allowing myself time to hesitate or to think, gave the letter to my brother.

"She shall have it to-morrow night," he said, "and my father shall know why you have left town, at the same time. Depend on me in this, as in everything else. And now, Basil, I must say good bye--unless you're in the humour for coming to look at my new house this evening. Ah! I see that won't suit you just now, so, good bye, old fellow! Write when you are in any necessity--get back your spirits and your health--and never doubt that the step you are now taking will be the best for Clara, and the best for yourself!"

He hurried out of the room, evidently feeling more at saying farewell than he was willing to let me discover. I was left alone for the rest of the day, to think whither I should turn my steps on the morrow.

I knew that it would be best that I should leave England; but there seemed to have grown within me, suddenly, a yearning towards my own country that I had never felt before--a home-sickness for the land in which my sister lived. Not once did my thoughts wander away to foreign places, while I now tried to consider calmly in what direction I should depart when I left London.

While I was still in doubt, my earliest impressions of childhood came back to my memory; and influenced by them, I thought of Cornwall. My nurse had been a Cornish woman; my first fancies and first feelings of curiosity had been excited by her Cornish stories, by the descriptions of the scenery, the customs, and the people of her native land, with which she was ever ready to amuse me. As I grew older, it had always been one of my favourite projects to go to Cornwall, to explore the wild western land, on foot, from hill to hill throughout. And now, when no motive of pleasure could influence my choice--now, when I was going forth homeless and alone, in uncertainty, in grief, in peril--the old fancy of long-past days still kept its influence, and

pointed out my new path to me among the rocky boundaries of the Cornish shore.

My last night in London was a night made terrible by Mannion's fearful image in all my dreams--made mournful, in my waking moments, by thoughts of the morrow which was to separate me from Clara. But I never faltered in my resolution to leave London for her sake. When the morning came, I collected my few necessaries, added to them one or two books, and was ready to depart.

My way through the streets took me near my father's house. As I passed by the well-remembered neighbourhood, my self-control so far deserted me, that I stopped and turned aside into the Square, in the hope of seeing Clara once more before I went away. Cautiously and doubtfully, as if I was a trespasser even on the public pavement, I looked up at the house which was no more my home--at the windows, side by side, of my sister's sitting-room and bed-room. She was neither standing near them, nor passing accidentally from one room to another at that moment. Still I could not persuade myself to go on. I thought of many and many an act of kindness that she had done for me, which I seemed never to have appreciated until now--I thought of what she had suffered, and might yet suffer, for my sake--and the longing to see her once more, though only for an instant, still kept me lingering near the house and looking up vainly at the lonely windows.

It was a bright, cool, autumnal morning; perhaps she might have gone out into the garden of the square: it used often to be her habit, when I was at home, to go there and read at this hour. I walked round, outside the railings, searching for her between gaps in the foliage; and had nearly made the circuit of the garden thus, before the figure of a lady sitting alone under one of the trees, attracted my attention. I stopped--looked intently towards her--and saw that it was Clara.

Her face was almost entirely turned from me; but I knew her by her dress, by her figure--even by her position, simple as it was. She was sitting with her hands on a closed book which rested on her knee. A little spaniel that I had given her lay asleep at her feet: she seemed to be looking down at the animal, as far as I could tell by the position of her head. When I moved aside, to try if I could see her face, the trees hid her from sight. I was obliged to be satisfied with the little I could discern of her, through the one gap in the foliage which gave me a clear view of the place where she was sitting. To speak to her, to risk the misery to both of us of saying farewell, was more than I dared trust myself to do. I could only stand silent, and look at her--it might be for the last time!--until the tears gathered in my eyes, so that I

could see nothing more. I resisted the temptation to dash them away. While they still hid her from me--while I could not see her again, if I would--I turned from the garden view, and left the Square.

Amid all the thoughts which thronged on me, as I walked farther and farther away from the neighbourhood of what was once my home; amid all the remembrances of past events--from the first day when I met Margaret Sherwin to the day when I stood by her grave--which were recalled by the mere act of leaving London, there now arose in my mind, for the first time, a doubt, which from that day to this has never left it; a doubt whether Mannion might not be tracking me in secret along every step of my way.

I stopped instinctively, and looked behind me. Many figures were moving in the distance; but the figure that I had seen in the churchyard was nowhere visible among them. A little further on, I looked back again, and still with the same result. After this, I let a longer interval elapse before I stopped; and then, for the third time, I turned round, and scanned the busy street-scene behind me, with eager, suspicious eyes. Some little distance back, on the opposite side of the way, I caught sight of a man who was standing still (as I was standing), amid the moving throng. His height was like Mannion's height; and he wore a cloak like the cloak I had seen on Mannion, when he approached me at Margaret's grave. More than this I could not detect, without crossing over. The passing vehicles and foot-passengers constantly intercepted my view, from the position in which I stood.

Was this figure, thus visible only by intervals, the figure of Mannion? and was he really tracking my steps? As the suspicion strengthened in my mind that it was so, the remembrance of his threat in the churchyard: "You may shield yourself behind your family and your friends: I will strike at you through the dearest and the bravest of them--" suddenly recurred to me; and brought with it a thought which urged me instantly to proceed on my way. I never looked behind me again, as I now walked on; for I said within myself:--"If he is following me, I must not, and will not avoid him: it will be the best result of my departure, that I shall draw after me that destroying presence; and thus at least remove it far and safely away from my family and my home!"

So, I neither turned aside from the straight direction, nor hurried my steps, nor looked back any more. At the time I had resolved on, I left London for Cornwall, without making any attempt to conceal my departure. And though I knew that he must surely be following me, still I never saw him again: never discovered how close or how far off he was on my track.

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Two months have passed since that period; and I know no more about him now than I knew then.

JOURNAL.

October 19th--My retrospect is finished. I have traced the history of my errors and misfortunes, of the wrong I have done and the punishment I have suffered for it, from the past to the present time.

The pages of my manuscript (many more than I thought to write at first) lie piled together on the table before me. I dare not look them over: I dare not read the lines which my own hand has traced. There may be much in my manner of writing that wants alteration; but I have no heart to return to my task, and revise and reconsider as I might if I were intent on producing a book which was to be published during my lifetime. Others will be found, when I am no more, to carve, and smooth, and polish to the popular taste of the day this rugged material of Truth which I shall leave behind me.

But now, while I collect these leaves, and seal them up, never to be opened again by my hands, can I feel that I have related all which it is necessary to tell? No! While Mannion lives--while I am ignorant of the changes that may yet be wrought in the home from which I am exiled--there remains for me a future which must be recorded, as the necessary sequel to the narrative of the past. What may yet happen worthy of record, I know not: what sufferings I may yet undergo, which may unfit me for continuing the labour now terminated for a time, I cannot foresee. I have not hope enough in the future, or in myself; to believe that I shall have the time or the energy to write hereafter, as I have written already, from recollection. It is best, then, that I should note down events daily as they occur; and so ensure, as far as may be, a continuation of my narrative, fragment by fragment, to the very last.

But, first, as a fit beginning to the Journal I now propose to keep, let me briefly reveal something, in this place, of the life that I am leading in my retirement on the Cornish coast.

The fishing hamlet in which I have written the preceding pages, is on the southern shore of Cornwall, not more than a few miles distant from the Land's End. The cottage I inhabit is built of rough granite, rudely thatched,

and has but two rooms. I possess no furniture but my bed, my table, and my chair; and some half-dozen fishermen and their families are my only neighbours. But I feel neither the want of luxuries, nor the want of society: all that I wished for in coming here, I have--the completest seclusion.

My arrival produced, at first, both astonishment and suspicion. The fishermen of Cornwall still preserve almost all the superstitions, even to the grossest, which were held dear by their humble ancestors, centuries back. My simple neighbours could not understand why I had no business to occupy me; could not reconcile my worn, melancholy face with my youthful years. Such loneliness as mine looked unnatural--especially to the women. They questioned me curiously; and the very simplicity of my answer, that I had only come to Cornwall to live in quiet, and regain my health, perplexed them afresh. They waited, day after day, when I was first installed in the cottage, to see letters sent to me--and no letters arrived: to see my friends join me--and no friends came. This deepened the mystery to their eyes. They began to recall to memory old Cornish legends of solitary, secret people who had lived, years and years ago, in certain parts of the county--coming, none knew whence; existing, none knew by what means; dying and disappearing, none knew when. They felt half inclined to identify me with these mysterious visitors--to consider me as some being, a stranger to the whole human family, who had come to waste away under a curse, and die ominously and secretly among them. Even the person to whom I first paid money for my necessaries, questioned, for a moment, the lawfulness and safety of receiving it!

But these doubts gradually died away; this superstitious curiosity insensibly wore off, among my poor neighbours. They became used to my solitary, thoughtful, and (to them) inexplicable mode of existence. One or two little services of kindness which I rendered, soon after my arrival, to their children, worked wonders in my favour; and I am pitied now, rather than distrusted. When the results of the fishing are abundant, a little present has been often made to me, out of the nets. Some weeks ago, after I had gone out in the morning, I found on my return, two or three gulls' eggs placed in a basket before my door. They had been left there by the children, as ornaments for my cottage window--the only ornaments they had to give; the only ornaments they had ever heard of.

I can now go out unnoticed, directing my steps up the ravine in which our hamlet is situated, towards the old grey stone church which stands solitary on the hill-top, surrounded by the lonesome moor. If any children happen to be playing among the scattered tombs, they do not start and run away, when they see me sitting on the coffin stone at the entrance of the

churchyard, or wandering round the sturdy granite tower, reared by hands which have mouldered into dust centuries ago. My approach has ceased to be of evil omen for my little neighbours. They just look up at me, for a moment, with bright smiles, and then go on with their game.

From the churchyard, I look down the ravine, on fine days, towards the sea. Mighty piles of granite soar above the fishermen's cottages on each side; the little strip of white beach which the cliffs shut in, glows pure in the sunlight; the inland stream that trickles down the bed of the rocks, sparkles, at places, like a rivulet of silver-fire; the round white clouds, with their violet shadows and bright wavy edges, roll on majestically above me; the cries of the sea-birds, the endless, dirging murmur of the surf, and the far music of the wind among the ocean caverns, fall, now together, now separately on my ear. Nature's voice and Nature's beauty--God's soothing and purifying angels of the soul--speak to me most tenderly and most happily, at such times as these.

It is when the rain falls, and wind and sea arise together--when, sheltered among the caverns in the side of the precipice, I look out upon the dreary waves and the leaping spray--that I feel the unknown dangers which hang over my head in all the horror of their uncertainty. Then, the threats of my deadly enemy strengthen their hold fearfully on all my senses. I see the dim and ghastly personification of a fatality that is lying in wait for me, in the strange shapes of the mist which shrouds the sky, and moves, and whirls, and brightens, and darkens in a weird glory of its own over the heaving waters. Then, the crash of the breakers on the reef howls upon me with a sound of judgment; and the voice of the wind, growling and battling behind me in the hollows of the cave, is, ever and ever, the same thunder-voice of doom and warning in my ear.

Does this foreboding that Mannion's eye is always on me, that his footsteps are always secretly following mine, proceed only from the weakness of my worn-out energies? Could others in my situation restrain themselves from fearing, as I do, that he is still incessantly watching me in secret? It is possible. It may be, that his terrible connection with all my sufferings of the past, makes me attach credit too easily to the destroying power which he arrogates to himself in the future. Or it may be, that all resolution to resist him is paralysed in me, not so much by my fear of his appearance, as by my uncertainty of the time when it will take place--not so much by his menaces themselves, as by the delay in their execution. Still, though I can estimate fairly the value of these considerations, they exercise over me no lasting influence of tranquillity. I remember what this man has done; and in spite of all reasoning, I believe in what he has told me he will yet do. Madman

though he may be, I have no hope of defence or escape from him in any direction, look where I will.

But for the occupation which the foregoing narrative has given to my mind; but for the relief which my heart can derive from its thoughts of Clara, I must have sunk under the torment of suspense and suspicion in which my life is now passed. My sister! Even in this self-imposed absence from her, I have still found a means of connecting myself remotely with something that she loves. I have taken, as the assumed name under which I live, and shall continue to live until my father has given me back his confidence and his affection, the name of a little estate that once belonged to my mother, and that now belongs to her daughter. Even the most wretched have their caprice, their last favourite fancy. I possess no memorial of Clara, not even a letter. The name that I have taken from the place which she was always fondest and proudest of, is, to me, what a lock of hair, a ring, any little loveable keepsake, is to others happier than I am.

I have wandered away from the simple details of my life in this place. Shall I now return to them? Not to-day; my head burns, my hand is weary. If the morrow should bring with it no event to write of, on the morrow I can resume the subject from which I now break off.

October 20th.--After laying aside my pen, I went out yesterday for the purpose of renewing that former friendly intercourse with my poor neighbours, which has been interrupted for the last three weeks by unintermitting labour at the latter portions of my narrative.

In the course of my walk among the cottages and up to the old church on the moor, I saw fewer of the people of the district than usual. The behaviour of those whom I did chance to meet, seemed unaccountably altered; perhaps it was mere fancy, but I thought they avoided me. One woman abruptly shut her cottage door as I approached. A fisherman, when I wished him good day, hardly answered; and walked on without stopping to gossip with me as usual. Some children, too, whom I overtook on the road to the church, ran away from me, making gestures to each other which I could not understand. Is the first superstitious distrust of me returning after I thought it had been entirely overcome? Or are my neighbours only showing their resentment at my involuntary neglect of them for the last three weeks? I must try to find out to-morrow.

21st--I have discovered all! The truth, which I was strangely slow to suspect yesterday, has forced itself on me to-day.

I went out this morning, as I had purposed, to discover whether my neighbours had really changed towards me, or not, since the interval of my three weeks' seclusion. At the cottage-door nearest to mine, two young children were playing, whom I knew I had succeeded in attaching to me soon after my arrival. I walked up to speak to them; but, as I approached, their mother came out, and snatched them from me with a look of anger and alarm. Before I could question her, she had taken them inside the cottage, and had closed the door.

Almost at the same moment, as if by a preconcerted signal, three or four other women came out from their abodes at a little distance, warned me in loud, angry voices not to come near them, or their children; and disappeared, shutting their doors. Still not suspecting the truth, I turned back, and walked towards the beach. The lad whom I employ to serve me with provisions, was lounging there against the side of an old boat. At seeing me, he started up, and walked away a few steps--then stopped, and called out--

"I'm not to bring you anything more; father says he won't sell to you again, whatever you pay him."

I asked the boy why his father had said that; but he ran back towards the village without answering me.

"You had best leave us," muttered a voice behind me. "If you don't go of your own accord, our people will starve you out of the place."

The man who said these words, had been one of the first to set the example of friendliness towards me, after my arrival; and to him I now turned for the explanation which no one else would give me.

"You know what we mean, and why we want you to go, well enough," was his reply.

I assured him that I did not; and begged him so earnestly to enlighten me, that he stopped as he was walking away.

"I'll tell you about it," he said; "but not now; I don't want to be seen with you." (As he spoke he looked back at the women, who were appearing once more in front of their cottages.) "Go home again, and shut yourself up; I'll come at dusk."

And he came as he had promised. But when I asked him to enter my

cottage, he declined, and said he would talk to me outside, at my window. This disinclination to be under my roof, reminded me that my supplies of food had, for the last week, been left on the window-ledge, instead of being brought into my room as usual. I had been too constantly occupied to pay much attention to the circumstance at the time; but I thought it very strange now.

"Do you mean to tell me you don't suspect why we want to get you out of our place here?" said the man, looking in distrustfully at me through the window.

I repeated that I could not imagine why they had all changed towards me, or what wrong they thought I had done them.

"Then I'll soon let you know it," he continued. "We want you gone from here, because--"

"Because," interrupted another voice behind him, which I recognised as his wife's, "because you're bringing a blight on us, and our houses--because we want our children's faces left as God made them--"

"Because," interposed a second woman, who had joined her, "you're bringing devil's vengeances among Christian people! Come back, John! he's not safe for a true man to speak to."

They dragged the fisherman away with them before he could say another word. I had heard enough. The fatal truth burst at once on my mind. Mannion had followed me to Cornwall: his threats were executed to the very letter!

(10 o'clock.)--I have lit my candle for the last time in this cottage, to add a few lines to my journal. The hamlet is quiet; I hear no footstep outside--and yet, can I be certain that Mannion is not lurking near my door at this moment?

I must go when the morning comes; I must leave this quiet retreat, in which I have lived so calmly until now. There is no hope that I can reinstate myself in the opinions of my poor neighbours. He has arrayed against me the pitiless hostility of their superstition. He has found out the dormant cruelties, even in the hearts of these simple people; and has awakened them against me, as he said he would. The evil work must have been begun

within the last three weeks, while I was much within doors, and there was little chance of meeting me in my usual walks. How that work was accomplished it is useless to inquire; my only object now, must be to prepare myself at once for departure.

(11 o'clock.)--While I was putting up my few books, a minute ago, a little embroidered marker fell out of one of them, which I had not observed in the pages before; and which I recognised as having been worked for me by Clara. I have a memorial of my sister in my possession, after all! Trifling as it is, I shall preserve it about me, as a messenger of consolation in the time of adversity and peril.

(1 o'clock.)--The wind sweeps down on us, from off the moorland, in fiercer and fiercer gusts; the waves dash heavily against our rock promontory; the rain drifts wildly past my windows; and the densest darkness overspreads the whole sky. The storm which has been threatening for some days, is gathering fast.

(Village of Treen, October 22nd.)--The events of this one day have changed the whole future of my life. I must force myself to write of them at once. Something warns me that if I delay, though only till to-morrow, I shall be incapable of relating them at all.

It was still early in the morning--I think about seven o'clock--when I closed my cottage door behind me, never to open it again. I met only one or two of my neighbours as I left the hamlet. They drew aside to let me advance, without saying a word. With a heavy heart, grieved more than I could have imagined possible at departing as an enemy from among the people with whom I had lived as a friend, I passed slowly by the last cottages, and ascended the cliff path which led to the moor.

The storm had raged at its fiercest some hours back. Soon after daylight the wind sank; but the majesty of the mighty sea had lost none of its terror and grandeur as yet. The huge Atlantic waves still hurled themselves, foaming and furious, against the massive granite of the Cornish cliffs. Overhead, the sky was hidden in a thick white mist, now hanging, still and dripping, down to the ground; now rolling in shapes like vast smoke-wreaths before the light wind which still blew at intervals. At a distance of more than a few yards, the largest objects were totally invisible. I had nothing to guide me, as I advanced, but the ceaseless roaring of the sea on my right hand.

It was my purpose to get to Penzance by night. Beyond that, I had no project, no thought of what refuge I should seek next. Any hope I might have formerly felt of escaping from Mannion, had now deserted me for ever. I could not discover by any outward indications, that he was still following my footsteps. The mist obscured all objects behind me from view; the ceaseless crashing of the shore-waves overwhelmed all landward sounds, but I never doubted for a moment that he was watching me, as I proceeded along my onward way.

I walked slowly, keeping from the edge of the precipices only by keeping the sound of the sea always at the same distance from my ear; knowing that I was advancing in the proper direction, though very circuitously, as long as I heard the waves on my right hand. To have ventured on the shorter way, by the moor and the cross-roads beyond it, would have been only to have lost myself past all chance of extrication, in the mist.

In this tedious manner I had gone on for some time, before it struck me that the noise of the sea was altering completely to my sense of hearing. It seemed to be sounding very strangely on each side of me--both on my right hand and on my left. I stopped and strained my eyes to look through the mist, but it was useless. Crags only a few yards off, seemed like shadows in the thick white vapour. Again, I went on a little; and, ere long, I heard rolling towards me, as it were, under my own feet, and under the roaring of the sea, a howling, hollow, intermittent sound--like thunder at a distance. I stopped again, and rested against a rock. After some time, the mist began to part to seaward, but remained still as thick as ever on each side of me. I went on towards the lighter sky in front--the thunder-sound booming louder and louder, in the very heart, as it seemed, of the great cliff.

The mist brightened yet a little more, and showed me a landmark to ships, standing on the highest point of the surrounding rocks. I climbed to it, recognised the glaring red and white pattern in which it was painted, and knew that I had wandered, in the mist, away from the regular line of coast, out on one of the great granite promontories which project into the sea, as natural breakwaters, on the southern shore of Cornwall.

I had twice penetrated as far as this place, at the earlier period of my sojourn in the fishing-hamlet, and while I now listened to the thunder-sound, I knew from what cause it proceeded.

Beyond the spot where I stood, the rocks descended suddenly, and almost perpendicularly, to the range below them. In one of the highest parts of the wall-side of granite thus formed, there opened a black, yawning hole that

slanted nearly straight downwards, like a tunnel, to unknown and unfathomable depths below, into which the waves found entrance through some subterranean channel. Even at calm times the sea was never silent in this frightful abyss, but on stormy days its fury was terrific. The wild waves boiled and thundered in their imprisonment, till they seemed to convulse the solid cliff about them, like an earthquake. But, high as they leapt up in the rocky walls of the chasm, they never leapt into sight from above. Nothing but clouds of spray indicated to the eye, what must be the horrible tumult of the raging waters below.

With my recognition of the place to which I had now wandered, came remembrance of the dangers I had left behind me on the rock-track that led from the mainland to the promontory--dangers of narrow ledges and treacherous precipices, which I had passed safely, while unconscious of them in the mist, but which I shrank from tempting again, now that I recollected them, until the sky had cleared, and I could see my way well before me. The atmosphere was still brightening slowly over the tossing, distant waves: I determined to wait until it had lost all its obscurity, before I ventured to retrace my steps.

I moved down towards the lower range of rocks, to seek a less exposed position than that which I now occupied. As I neared the chasm, the terrific howling of the waves inside it was violent enough to drown, not only the crashing sound of the surf on the outward crags of the promontory, but even the shrill cries of the hundreds on hundreds of sea-birds that whirled around me, except when their flight was immediately over my head. At each side of the abyss, the rocks, though very precipitous, afforded firm hold for hand and foot. As I descended them, the morbid longing to look on danger, which has led many a man to the very brink of a precipice, even while he dreaded it, led me to advance as near as I durst to the side of the great hole, and to gaze down into it. I could see but little of its black, shining, interior walls, or of the fragments of rock which here and there jutted out from them, crowned with patches of long, lank, sea-weed waving slowly to and fro in empty space--I could see but little of these things, for the spray from the bellowing water in the invisible depths below, steamed up almost incessantly, like smoke, and shot, hissing in clouds out of the mouth of the chasm, on to a huge flat rock, covered with sea-weed, that lay beneath and in front of it. The very sight of this smooth, slippery plane of granite, shelving steeply downward, right into the gaping depths of the hole, made my head swim; the thundering of the water bewildered and deafened me--I moved away while I had the power: away, some thirty or forty yards in a lateral direction, towards the edges of the promontory which looked down on the sea. Here, the rocks rose again in wild shapes, forming natural caverns

and penthouses. Towards one of these I now advanced, to shelter myself till the sky had cleared.

I had just entered the place, close to the edge of the cliff, when a hand was laid suddenly and firmly on my arm; and, through the crashing of the waves below, the thundering of the water in the abyss behind, and the shrieking of the seabirds overhead, I heard these words, spoken close to my ear:--

"Take care of your life. It is not your's to throw away--it is mine!"

I turned, and saw Mannion standing by me. No shade concealed the hideous distortion of his face. His eye was on me, as he pointed significantly down to the surf foaming two hundred feet beneath us.

"Suicide!" he said slowly--"I suspected it, and, this time, I followed close: followed, to fight with death, which should have you."

As I moved back from the edge of the precipice, and shook him from me, I marked the vacancy that glared even through the glaring triumph of his eye, and remembered how I had been warned against him at the hospital.

The mist was thickening again, but thickening now in clouds that parted and changed minute by minute, under the influence of the light behind them. I had noticed these sudden transitions before, and knew them to be the signs which preceded the speedy clearing of the atmosphere.

When I looked up at the sky, Mannion stepped back a few paces, and pointed in the direction of the fishing-hamlet from which I had departed.

"Even in that remote place," he said, "and among those ignorant people, my deformed face has borne witness against you, and Margaret's death has been avenged, as I said it should. You have been expelled as a pest and a curse, by a community of poor fishermen; you have begun to live your life of excommunication, as I lived mine. Superstition!--barbarous, monstrous superstition, which I found ready made to my use, is the scourge with which I have driven you from that hiding-place. Look at me now! I have got back my strength; I am no longer the sick refuse of the hospital. Where you go, I have the limbs and the endurance to go too! I tell you again, we are linked together for life; I cannot leave you if I would. The horrible joy of hunting you through the world, leaps in my blood like fire! Look! look out on those tossing waves. There is no rest for them; there shall be no rest for you!"

The sight of him, standing close by me in that wild solitude; the hoarse

sound of his voice, as he raised it almost to raving in his exultation over my helplessness; the incessant crashing of the sea on the outer rocks; the roaring of the tortured waters imprisoned in the depths of the abyss behind us; the obscurity of the mist, and the strange, wild shapes it began to take, as it now rolled almost over our heads---all that I saw, all that I heard, seemed suddenly to madden me, as Mannion uttered his last words. My brain felt turned to fire; my heart to ice. A horrible temptation to rid myself for ever of the wretch before me, by hurling him over the precipice at my feet, seized on me. I felt my hands stretching themselves out towards him without my willing it--if I had waited another instant, I should have dashed him or myself to destruction. But I turned back in time; and, reckless of all danger, fled from the sight of him, over the rugged and perilous surface of the cliff.

The shock of a fall among the rocks, before I had advanced more than a few yards, partly restored my self-possession. Still, I dared not look back to see if Mannion was following me, so long as the precipice behind him was within view.

I began to climb to the higher range of rocks almost at the same spot by which I had descended from them--judging by the close thunder of the water in the chasm. Halfway up, I stopped at a broad resting-place; and found that I must proceed a little, either to the right or to the left, in a horizontal direction, before I could easily get higher. At that moment, the mist was slowly brightening again. I looked first to the left, to see where I could get good foothold--then to the right, towards the outer sides of the riven rocks close at hand.

At the same instant, I caught sight dimly of the figure of Mannion, moving shadow-like below and beyond me, skirting the farther edge of the slippery plane of granite that shelved into the gaping mouth of the hole. The brightening atmosphere showed him that he had risked himself, in the mist, too near to a dangerous place. He stopped--looked up and saw me watching him--raised his hand--and shook it threateningly in the air. The ill-calculated violence of his action, in making that menacing gesture, destroyed his equilibrium--he staggered--tried to recover himself--swayed half round where he stood--then fell heavily backward, right on to the steep shelving rock.

The wet sea-weed slipped through his fingers, as they madly clutched at it. He struggled frantically to throw himself towards the side of the declivity; slipping further and further down it at every effort. Close to the mouth of the abyss, he sprang up as if he had been shot. A tremendous jet of spray

hissed out upon him at the same moment. I heard a scream, so shrill, so horribly unlike any human cry, that it seemed to silence the very thundering of the water. The spray fell. For one instant, I saw two livid and bloody hands tossed up against the black walls of the hole, as he dropped into it. Then, the waves roared again fiercely in their hidden depths; the spray flew out once more; and when it cleared off; nothing was to be seen at the yawning mouth of the chasm--nothing moved over the shelving granite, but some torn particles of sea-weed sliding slowly downwards in the running ooze.

The shock of that sight must have paralysed within me the power of remembering what followed it; for I can recall nothing, after looking on the emptiness of the rock below, except that I crouched on the ledge under my feet, to save myself from falling off it--that there was an interval of oblivion--and that I seemed to awaken again, as it were, to the thundering of the water in the abyss. When I rose and looked around me, the seaward sky was lovely in its clearness; the foam of the leaping waves flashed gloriously in the sunlight: and all that remained of the mist was one great cloud of purple shadow, hanging afar off over the whole inland view.

I traced my way back along the promontory feebly and slowly. My weakness was so great, that I trembled in every limb. A strange uncertainty about directing myself in the simplest actions, overcame my mind. Sometimes, I stopped short, hesitating in spite of myself at the slightest obstacles in my path. Sometimes, I grew confused without any cause, about the direction in which I was proceeding, and fancied I was going back to the fishing village.. The sight that I had witnessed, seemed to be affecting me physically, far more than mentally. As I dragged myself on my weary way along the coast, there was always the same painful vacancy in my thoughts: there seemed to be no power in them yet, of realising Mannion's appalling death.

By the time I arrived at this village, my strength was so utterly exhausted, that the people at the inn were obliged to help me upstairs. Even now, after some hours' rest, the mere exertion of dipping my pen in the ink begins to be a labour and a pain to me. There is a strange fluttering at my heart; my recollections are growing confused again--I can write no more.

23rd.--The frightful scene that I witnessed yesterday still holds the same disastrous influence over me. I have vainly endeavoured to think, not of Mannion's death, but of the free prospect which that death has opened to my view. Waking or sleeping, it is as if some fatality kept all my faculties imprisoned within the black walls of the chasm. I saw the livid, bleeding hands flying past them again, in my dreams, last night. And now, while the

morning is clear and the breeze is fresh, no repose, no change comes to my thoughts. Time bright beauty of unclouded daylight seems to have lost the happy influence over me which it used formerly to possess.

25th.--All yesterday I had not energy enough even to add a line to this journal. The strength to control myself seems to have gone from me. The slightest accidental noise in the house, throws me into a fit of trembling which I cannot subdue. Surely, if ever the death of one human being brought release and salvation to another, the death of Mannion has brought them to me; and yet, the effect left on my mind by the horror of having seen it, is still not lessened--not even by the knowledge of all that I have gained by being freed from the deadliest and most determined enemy that man ever had.

26th.--Visions--half waking, half dreaming--all through the night. Visions of my last lonely evening in the fishing-hamlet--of Mannion again--the livid hands whirling to and fro over my head in the darkness--then, glimpses of home; of Clara reading to me in my study--then, a change to the room where Margaret died--the sight of her again, with her long black hair streaming over her face--then, oblivion for a little while--then, Mannion once more; walking backwards and forwards by my bedside--his death, seeming like a dream; his watching me through the night like a reality to which I had just awakened--Clara walking opposite to him on the other side--Ralph between them, pointing at me.

27th.--I am afraid my mind is seriously affected; it must have been fatally weakened before I passed through the terrible scenes among the rocks of the promontory. My nerves must have suffered far more than I suspected at the time, under the constant suspense in which I have been living since I left London, and under the incessant strain and agitation of writing the narrative of all that has happened to me. Shall I send a letter to Ralph? No--not yet. It might look like impatience, like not being able to bear my necessary absence as calmly and resolutely as I ought.

28th.--A wakeful night--tormented by morbid apprehensions that the reports about me in the fishing-village may spread to this place; that inquiries may be made after Mannion; and that I may be suspected of having caused his death.

29th.--The people at the inn have sent to get me medical advice. The doctor came to-day. He was kindness itself; but I fell into a fit of trembling, the moment he entered the room--grew confused in attempting to tell him what was the matter with me--and, at last, could not articulate a single word

distinctly. He looked very grave as he examined me and questioned the landlady. I thought I heard him say something about sending for my friends, but could not be certain.

31st.--Weaker and weaker. I tried in despair, to-day, to write to Ralph; but knew not how to word the letter. The simplest forms of expression confused themselves inextricably in my mind. I was obliged to give it up. It is a surprise to me to find that I can still add with my pencil to the entries in this Journal! When I am no longer able to continue, in some sort, the employment to which I have been used for so many weeks past, what will become of me? Shall I have lost the only safeguard that keeps me in my senses?

* * * * *

Worse! worse! I have forgotten what day of the month it is; and cannot remember it for a moment together, when they tell me--cannot even recollect how long I have been confined to my bed. I feel as if my heart was wasting away. Oh! if I could only see Clara again.

* * * * *

The doctor and a strange man have been looking among my papers.

My God! am I dying? dying at the very time when there is a chance of happiness for my future life?

* * * * *

Clara!--far from her--nothing but the little book-marker she worked for me--leave it round my neck when I--

I can't move, or breathe, or think--if I could only be taken back--if my father could see me as I am now! Night again--the dreams that will come--always of home; sometimes, the untried home in heaven, as well as the familiar home on earth--

* * * * *

Clara! I shall die out of my senses, unless Clara--break the news gently--it may kill her--

Her face so bright and calm! her watchful, weeping eyes always looking at

me, with a light in them that shines steady through the quivering tears. While the light lasts, I shall live; when it begins to die out--*

NOTE BY THE EDITOR.

* There are some lines of writing beyond this point; but they are illegible.