THE PROLOGUE

I

The resistless influences which are one day to reign supreme over our poor hearts, and to shape the sad short course of our lives, are sometimes of mysteriously remote origin, and find their devious ways to us through the hearts and the lives of strangers.

While the young man whose troubled career it is here proposed to follow was wearing his first jacket, and bowling his first hoop, a domestic misfortune, falling on a household of strangers, was destined nevertheless to have its ultimate influence over his happiness, and to shape the whole aftercourse of his life.

For this reason, some First Words must precede the Story, and must present the brief narrative of what happened in the household of strangers. By what devious ways the event here related affected the chief personage of these pages, when he grew to manhood, it will be the business of the story to trace, over land and sea, among men and women, in bright days and dull days alike, until the end is reached, and the pen (God willing) is put back in the desk.

II

Old Benjamin Ronald (of the Stationers' Company) took a young wife at the ripe age of fifty, and carried with him into the holy estate of matrimony some of the habits of his bachelor life.

As a bachelor, he had never willingly left his shop (situated in that exclusively commercial region of London which is called "the City") from one year's end to another. As a married man, he persisted in following the same monotonous course; with this one difference, that he now had a woman to follow it with him. "Travelling by railway," he explained to his wife, "will make your head ache--it makes my head ache. Travelling by sea will make you sick--it makes me sick. If you want change of air, every sort of air is to be found in the City. If you admire the beauties of Nature, there is Finsbury Square with the beauties of Nature carefully selected and arranged. When we are in London, you (and I) are all right; and when we are out of London, you (and I) are all wrong." As surely as the autumn holiday season set in, so surely Old Ronald resisted his wife's petition for a change of scene in that form of words. A man habitually fortified behind his own inbred obstinacy and selfishness is for the most part an irresistible power within the limits of his domestic circle. As a rule, patient Mrs. Ronald yielded; and her husband stood revealed to his neighbours in the glorious character of a married man who had his own way.

But in the autumn of 1856, the retribution which sooner or later descends on all despotisms, great and small, overtook the iron rule of Old Ronald, and defeated the domestic tyrant on the battle-field of his own fireside.

The children born of the marriage, two in number, were both daughters. The elder had mortally offended her father by marrying imprudently--in a pecuniary sense. He had declared that she should never enter his house again; and he had mercilessly kept his word. The younger daughter (now eighteen years of age) proved to be also a source of parental inquietude, in another way. She was the passive cause of the revolt which set her father's authority at defiance. For some little time past she had been out of health. After many ineffectual trials of the mild influence of persuasion, her mother's patience at last gave way. Mrs. Ronald insisted--yes, actually insisted--on taking Miss Emma to the seaside.

"What's the matter with you?" Old Ronald asked; detecting something that perplexed him in his wife's look and manner, on the memorable occasion

when she asserted a will of her own for the first time in her life.

A man of finer observation would have discovered the signs of no ordinary anxiety and alarm, struggling to show themselves openly in the poor woman's face. Her husband only saw a change that puzzled him. "Send for Emma," he said, his natural cunning inspiring him with the idea of confronting the mother and daughter, and of seeing what came of that. Emma appeared, plump and short, with large blue eyes, and full pouting lips, and splendid yellow hair: otherwise, miserably pale, languid in her movements, careless in her dress, sullen in her manner. Out of health as her mother said, and as her father saw.

"You can see for yourself," said Mrs. Ronald, "that the girl is pining for fresh air. I have heard Ramsgate recommended."

Old Ronald looked at his daughter. She represented the one tender place in his nature. It was not a large place; but it did exist. And the proof of it is, that he began to yield--with the worst possible grace.

"Well, we will see about it," he said.

"There is no time to be lost," Mrs. Ronald persisted. "I mean to take her to Ramsgate tomorrow."

Mr. Ronald looked at his wife as a dog looks at the maddened sheep that turns on him. "You mean?" repeated the stationer. "Upon my soul--what next? You mean? Where is the money to come from? Answer me that."

Mrs. Ronald declined to be drawn into a conjugal dispute, in the presence of her daughter. She took Emma's arm, and led her to the door. There she stopped, and spoke. "I have already told you that the girl is ill," she said to her husband. "And I now tell you again that she must have the sea air. For God's sake, don't let us quarrel! I have enough to try me without that." She closed the door on herself and her daughter, and left her lord and master standing face to face with the wreck of his own outraged authority.

What further progress was made by the domestic revolt, when the bedroom candles were lit, and the hour of retirement had arrived with the night, is naturally involved in mystery. This alone is certain: On the next morning, the luggage was packed, and the cab was called to the door. Mrs. Ronald spoke her parting words to her husband in private.

"I hope I have not expressed myself too strongly about taking Emma to the

seaside," she said, in gentle pleading tones. "I am anxious about our girl's health. If I have offended you--without meaning it, God knows!--say you forgive me before I go. I have tried honestly, dear, to be a good wife to you. And you have always trusted me, haven't you? And you trust me still?"

She took his lean cold hand, and pressed it fervently: her eyes rested on him with a strange mixture of timidity and anxiety. Still in the prime of her life, she preserved the personal attractions--the fair calm refined face, the natural grace of look and movement--which had made her marriage to a man old enough to be her father a cause of angry astonishment among all her friends. In the agitation that now possessed her, her colour rose, her eyes brightened; she looked for the moment almost young enough to be Emma's sister. Her husband opened his hard old eyes in surly bewilderment. "Why need you make this fuss?" he asked. "I don't understand you." Mrs. Ronald shrank at those words as if he had struck her. She kissed him in silence, and joined her daughter in the cab.

For the rest of that day, the persons in the stationer's employment had a hard time of it with their master in the shop. Something had upset Old Ronald. He ordered the shutters to be put up earlier that evening than usual. Instead of going to his club (at the tavern round the corner), he took a long walk in the lonely and lifeless streets of the City by night. There was no disguising it from himself; his wife's behaviour at parting had made him uneasy. He naturally swore at her for taking that liberty, while he lay awake alone in his bed. "Damn the woman! What does she mean?" The cry of the soul utters itself in various forms of expression. That was the cry of Old Ronald's soul, literally translated.

III

The next morning brought him a letter from Ramsgate.

"I write immediately to tell you of our safe arrival. We have found comfortable lodgings (as the address at the head of this letter will inform you) in Albion Place. I thank you, and Emma desires to thank you also, for your kindness in providing us with ample means for taking our little trip. It is beautiful weather today; the sea is calm, and the pleasure-boats are out. We do not of course expect to see you here. But if you do, by any chance, overcome your objection to moving out of London, I have a little request to make. Please let me hear of your visit beforehand--so that I may not omit all needful preparations. I know you dislike being troubled with letters (except on business), so I will not write too frequently. Be so good as to take no news for good news, in the intervals. When you have a few minutes to spare, you will write, I hope, and tell me how you and the shop are going on. Emma sends you her love, in which I beg to join." So the letter was expressed, and so it ended.

"They needn't be afraid of my troubling them. Calm seas and pleasure-boats! Stuff and nonsense!" Such was the first impression which his wife's report of herself produced on Old Ronald's mind. After a while, he looked at the letter again--and frowned, and reflected. "Please let me hear of your visit beforehand," he repeated to himself, as if the request had been, in some incomprehensible way, offensive to him. He opened the drawer of his desk, and threw the letter into it. When business was over for the day, he went to his club at the tavern, and made himself unusually disagreeable to everybody.

A week passed. In the interval he wrote briefly to his wife. "I'm all right, and the shop goes on as usual." He also forwarded one or two letters which came for Mrs. Ronald. No more news reached him from Ramsgate. "I suppose they're enjoying themselves," he reflected. "The house looks queer without them; I'll go to the club."

He stayed later than usual, and drank more than usual, that night. It was nearly one in the morning when he let himself in with his latch-key, and went upstairs to bed.

Approaching the toilette-table, he found a letter lying on it, addressed to "Mr. Ronald--private." It was not in his wife's handwriting; not in any

handwriting known to him. The characters sloped the wrong way, and the envelope bore no postmark. He eyed it over and over suspiciously. At last he opened it, and read these lines:

"You are advised by a true friend to lose no time in looking after your wife. There are strange doings at the seaside. If you don't believe me, ask Mrs. Turner, Number 1, Slains Row, Ramsgate."

No address, no date, no signature--an anonymous letter, the first he had ever received in the long course of his life.

His hard brain was in no way affected by the liquor that he had drunk. He sat down on his bed, mechanically folding and refolding the letter. The reference to "Mrs. Turner" produced no impression on him of any sort: no person of that name, common as it was, happened to be numbered on the list of his friends or his customers. But for one circumstance, he would have thrown the letter aside, in contempt. His memory reverted to his wife's incomprehensible behaviour at parting. Addressing him through that remembrance, the anonymous warning assumed a certain importance to his mind. He went down to his desk, in the back office, and took his wife's letter out of the drawer, and read it through slowly. "Ha!" he said, pausing as he came across the sentence which requested him to write beforehand, in the unlikely event of his deciding to go to Ramsgate. He thought again of the strangely persistent way in which his wife had dwelt on his trusting her; he recalled her nervous anxious looks, her deepening colour, her agitation at one moment, and then her sudden silence and sudden retreat to the cab. Fed by these irritating influences, the inbred suspicion in his nature began to take fire slowly. She might be innocent enough in asking him to give her notice before he joined her at the seaside--she might naturally be anxious to omit no needful preparation for his comfort. Still, he didn't like it; no, he didn't like it. An appearance as of a slow collapse passed little by little over his rugged wrinkled face. He looked many years older than his age, as he sat at the desk, with the flaring candlelight close in front of him, thinking. The anonymous letter lay before him, side by side with his wife's letter. On a sudden, he lifted his gray head, and clenched his fist, and struck the venomous written warning as if it had been a living thing that could feel. "Whoever you are," he said, "I'll take your advice."

He never even made the attempt to go to bed that night. His pipe helped him through the comfortless and dreary hours. Once or twice he thought of his daughter. Why had her mother been so anxious about her? Why had her mother taken her to Ramsgate? Perhaps, as a blind--ah, yes, perhaps as a blind! More for the sake of something to do than for any other reason, he

packed a handbag with a few necessaries. As soon as the servant was stirring, he ordered her to make him a cup of strong coffee. After that, it was time to show himself as usual, on the opening of the shop. To his astonishment, he found his clerk taking down the shutters, in place of the porter.

"What does this mean?" he asked. "Where is Farnaby?"

The clerk looked at his master, and paused aghast with a shutter in his hands.

"Good Lord! what has come to you?" he cried. "Are you ill?"

Old Ronald angrily repeated his question: "Where is Farnaby?"

"I don't know," was the answer.

"You don't know? Have you been up to his bedroom?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"Well, he isn't in his bedroom. And, what's more, his bed hasn't been slept in last night. Farnaby's off, sir--nobody knows where."

Old Ronald dropped heavily into the nearest chair. This second mystery, following on the mystery of the anonymous letter, staggered him. But his business instincts were still in good working order. He held out his keys to the clerk. "Get the petty cash-book," he said, "and see if the money is all right."

The clerk received the keys under protest. "That's not the right reading of the riddle," he remarked.

"Do as I tell you!"

The clerk opened the money-drawer under the counter; counted the pounds, shillings and pence paid by chance customers up to the closing of the shop on the previous evening; compared the result with the petty cash-book, and answered, "Right to a halfpenny."

Satisfied so far, old Ronald condescended to approach the speculative side

of the subject, with the assistance of his subordinate. "If what you said just now means anything," he resumed, "it means that you suspect the reason why Farnaby has left my service. Let's hear it."

"You know that I never liked John Farnaby," the clerk began. "An active young fellow and a clever young fellow, I grant you. But a bad servant for all that. False, Mr. Ronald--false to the marrow of his bones."

Mr. Ronald's patience began to give way. "Come to the facts," he growled. "Why has Farnaby gone off without a word to anybody? Do you know that?"

"I know no more than you do," the clerk answered coolly. "Don't fly into a passion. I have got some facts for you, if you will only give me time. Turn them over in your own mind, and see what they come to. Three days ago I was short of postage-stamps, and I went to the office. Farnaby was there, waiting at the desk where they pay the post-office orders. There must have been ten or a dozen people with letters, orders, and what not, between him and me. I got behind him quietly, and looked over his shoulder. I saw the clerk give him the money for his post-office order. Five pounds in gold, which I reckoned as they lay on the counter, and a bank-note besides, which he crumpled up in his hand. I can't tell you how much it was for; I only know it was a bank-note. Just ask yourself how a porter on twenty shillings a week (with a mother who takes in washing, and a father who takes in drink) comes to have a correspondent who sends him an order for five sovereigns--and a bank-note, value unknown. Say he's turned betting-man in secret. Very good. There's the post-office order, in that case, to show that he's got a run of luck. If he has got a run of luck, tell me this--why does he leave his place like a thief in the night? He's not a slave; he's not even an apprentice. When he thinks he can better himself, he has no earthly need to keep it a secret that he means to leave your service. He may have met with an accident, to be sure. But that's not my belief. I say he's up to some mischief And now comes the question: What are we to do?"

Mr. Ronald, listening with his head down, and without interposing a word on his own part, made an extraordinary answer. "Leave it," he said. "Leave it till tomorrow."

"Why?" the clerk answered, without ceremony.

Mr. Ronald made another extraordinary answer. "Because I am obliged to go out of town for the day. Look after the business. The ironmonger's man over the way will help you to put up the shutters at night. If anybody inquires for me, say I shall be back tomorrow." With those parting directions, heedless of

the effect that he had produced on the clerk, he looked at his watch, and left the shop.

IV

The bell which gave five minutes' notice of the starting of the Ramsgate train had just rung.

While the other travellers were hastening to the platform, two persons stood passively apart as if they had not even yet decided on taking their places in the train. One of the two was a smart young man in a cheap travelling suit; mainly noticeable by his florid complexion, his restless dark eyes, and his profusely curling black hair. The other was a middle-aged woman in frowsy garments; tall and stout, sly and sullen. The smart young man stood behind the uncongenial-looking person with whom he had associated himself, using her as a screen to hide him while he watched the travellers on their way to the train. As the bell rang, the woman suddenly faced her companion, and pointed to the railway clock.

"Are you waiting to make up your mind till the train has gone?" she asked.

The young man frowned impatiently. "I am waiting for a person whom I expect to see," he answered. "If the person travels by this train, we shall travel by it. If not, we shall come back here, and look out for the next train, and so on till night-time, if it's necessary."

The woman fixed her small scowling gray eyes on the man as he replied in those terms. "Look here!" she broke out. "I like to see my way before me. You're a stranger, young Mister; and it's as likely as not you've given me a false name and address. That don't matter. False names are commoner than true ones, in my line of life. But mind this! I don't stir a step farther till I've got half the money in my hand, and my return-ticket there and back."

"Hold your tongue!" the man suddenly interposed in a whisper. "It's all right. I'll get the tickets."

He looked while he spoke at an elderly traveller, hastening by with his head down, deep in thought, noticing nobody. The traveller was Mr. Ronald. The young man, who had that moment recognized him, was his runaway porter, John Farnaby.

Returning with the tickets, the porter took his repellent travelling companion by the arm, and hurried her along the platform to the train. "The money!" she whispered, as they took their places. Farnaby handed it to her,

ready wrapped up in a morsel of paper. She opened the paper, satisfied herself that no trick had been played her, and leaned back in her corner to go to sleep. The train started. Old Ronald travelled by the second class; his porter and his porter's companion accompanied him secretly by the third.

V

It was still early in the afternoon when Mr. Ronald descended the narrow street which leads from the high land of the South-Eastern railway station to the port of Ramsgate. Asking his way of the first policeman whom he met, he turned to the left, and reached the cliff on which the houses in Albion Place are situated. Farnaby followed him at a discreet distance; and the woman followed Farnaby.

Arrived in sight of the lodging-house, Mr. Ronald paused--partly to recover his breath, partly to compose himself. He was conscious of a change of feeling as he looked up at the windows: his errand suddenly assumed a contemptible aspect in his own eyes. He almost felt ashamed of himself. After twenty years of undisturbed married life, was it possible that he had doubted his wife--and that at the instigation of a stranger whose name even was unknown to him? "If she was to step out in the balcony, and see me down here," he thought, "what a fool I should look!" He felt half-inclined, at the moment when he lifted the knocker of the door, to put it back again quietly, and return to London. No! it was too late. The maid-servant was hanging up her birdcage in the area of the house; the maid-servant had seen him.

"Does Mrs. Ronald lodge here?" he asked.

The girl lifted her eyebrows and opened her mouth--stared at him in speechless confusion--and disappeared in the kitchen regions. This strange reception of his inquiry irritated him unreasonably. He knocked with the absurd violence of a man who vents his anger on the first convenient thing that he can find. The landlady opened the door, and looked at him in stern and silent surprise.

"Does Mrs. Ronald lodge here?" he repeated.

The landlady answered with some appearance of effort--the effort of a person who was carefully considering her words before she permitted them to pass her lips.

"Mrs. Ronald has taken rooms here. But she has not occupied them yet."

"Not occupied them yet?" The words bewildered him as if they had been spoken in an unknown tongue. He stood stupidly silent on the doorstep. His

anger was gone; an all-mastering fear throbbed heavily at his heart. The landlady looked at him, and said to her secret self: "Just what I suspected; there is something wrong!"

"Perhaps I have not sufficiently explained myself, sir," she resumed with grave politeness. "Mrs. Ronald told me that she was staying at Ramsgate with friends. She would move into my house, she said, when her friends left--but they had not quite settled the day yet. She calls here for letters. Indeed, she was here early this morning, to pay the second week's rent. I asked when she thought of moving in. She didn't seem to know; her friends (as I understood) had not made up their minds. I must say I thought it a little odd. Would you like to leave any message?"

He recovered himself sufficiently to speak. "Can you tell me where her friends live?" he said.

The landlady shook her head. "No, indeed. I offered to save Mrs. Ronald the trouble of calling here, by sending letters or cards to her present residence. She declined the offer--and she has never mentioned the address. Would you like to come in and rest, sir? I will see that your card is taken care of, if you wish to leave it."

"Thank you, ma'am--it doesn't matter--good morning."

The landlady looked after him as he descended the house-steps. "It's the husband, Peggy," she said to the servant, waiting inquisitively behind her. "Poor old gentleman! And such a respectable-looking woman, too!"

Mr. Ronald walked mechanically to the end of the row of houses, and met the wide grand view of sea and sky. There were some seats behind the railing which fenced the edge of the cliff. He sat down, perfectly stupefied and helpless, on the nearest bench.

At the close of life, the loss of a man's customary nourishment extends its debilitating influence rapidly from his body to his mind. Mr. Ronald had tasted nothing but his cup of coffee since the previous night. His mind began to wander strangely; he was not angry or frightened or distressed. Instead of thinking of what had just happened, he was thinking of his young days when he had been a cricket-player. One special game revived in his memory, at which he had been struck on the head by the ball. "Just the same feeling," he reflected vacantly, with his hat off, and his hand on his forehead. "Dazed and giddy--just the same feeling!"

He leaned back on the bench, and fixed his eyes on the sea, and wondered languidly what had come to him. Farnaby and the woman, still following, waited round the corner where they could just keep him in view.

The blue lustre of the sky was without a cloud; the sunny sea leapt under the fresh westerly breeze. From the beach, the cries of children at play, the shouts of donkey-boys driving their poor beasts, the distant notes of brass instruments playing a waltz, and the mellow music of the small waves breaking on the sand, rose joyously together on the fragrant air. On the next bench, a dirty old boatman was prosing to a stupid old visitor. Mr. Ronald listened, with a sense of vacant content in the mere act of listening. The boatman's words found their way to his ears like the other sounds that were abroad in the air. "Yes; them's the Goodwin Sands, where you see the lightship. And that steamer there, towing a vessel into the harbour, that's the Ramsgate Tug. Do you know what I should like to see? I should like to see the Ramsgate Tug blow up. Why? I'll tell you why. I belong to Broadstairs; I don't belong to Ramsgate. Very well. I'm idling here, as you may see, without one copper piece in my pocket to rub against another. What trade do I belong to? I don't belong to no trade; I belong to a boat. The boat's rotting at Broadstairs, for want of work. And all along of what? All along of the Tug. The Tug has took the bread out of our mouths: me and my mates. Wait a bit; I'll show you how. What did a ship do, in the good old times, when she got on them sands--Goodwin Sands? Went to pieces, if it come on to blow; or got sucked down little by little when it was fair weather. Now I'm coming to it. What did We do (in the good old times, mind you) when we happened to see that ship in distress? Out with our boat; blow high or blow low, out with our boat. And saved the lives of the crew, did you say? Well, yes; saving the crew was part of the day's work, to be sure; the part we didn't get paid for. We saved the cargo, Master! and got salvage!! Hundreds of pounds, I tell you, divided amongst us by law!!! Ah, those times are gone. A parcel of sneaks get together, and subscribe to build a Steam-Tug. When a ship gets on the sands now, out goes the Tug, night and day alike, and brings her safe into harbour, and takes the bread out of our mouths. Shameful--that's what I call it--shameful."

The last words of the boatman's lament fell lower, lower, lower on Mr. Ronald's ears--he lost them altogether--he lost the view of the sea--he lost the sense of the wind blowing over him. Suddenly, he was roused as if from a deep sleep. On one side, the man from Broadstairs was shaking him by the collar. "I say, Master, cheer up; what's come to you?" On the other side, a compassionate lady was offering her smelling-bottle. "I am afraid, sir, you have fainted." He struggled to his feet, and vacantly thanked the lady. The man from Broadstairs--with an eye to salvage--took charge of the human

wreck, and towed him to the nearest public-house. "A chop and a glass of brandy-and-water," said this good Samaritan of the nineteenth century. "That's what you want. I'm peckish myself, and I'll keep you company."

He was perfectly passive in the hands of any one who would take charge of him; he submitted as if he had been the boatman's dog, and had heard the whistle.

It could only be truly said that he had come to himself, when there had been time enough for him to feel the reanimating influence of the food and drink. Then he got to his feet, and looked with incredulous wonder at the companion of his meal. The man from Broadstairs opened his greasy lips, and was silenced by the sudden appearance of a gold coin between Mr. Ronald's finger and thumb. "Don't speak to me; pay the bill, and bring me the change outside." When the boatman joined him, he was reading a letter; walking to and fro, and speaking at intervals to himself. "God help me, have I lost my senses? I don't know what to do next." He referred to the letter again: "if you don't believe me, ask Mrs. Turner, Number 1, Slains Row, Ramsgate." He put the letter back in his pocket, and rallied suddenly. "Slains Row," he said, turning to the boatman. "Take me there directly, and keep the change for yourself."

The boatman's gratitude was (apparently) beyond expression in words. He slapped his pocket cheerfully, and that was all. Leading the way inland, he went downhill, and uphill again--then turned aside towards the eastern extremity of the town.

Farnaby, still following, with the woman behind him, stopped when the boatman diverged towards the east, and looked up at the name of the street. "I've got my instructions," he said; "I know where he's going. Step out! We'll get there before him, by another way."

Mr. Ronald and his guide reached a row of poor little houses, with poor little gardens in front of them and behind them. The back windows looked out on downs and fields lying on either side of the road to Broadstairs. It was a lost and lonely spot. The guide stopped, and put a question with inquisitive respect. "What number, sir?" Mr. Ronald had sufficiently recovered himself to keep his own counsel. "That will do," he said. "You can leave me." The boatman waited a moment. Mr. Ronald looked at him. The boatman was slow to understand that his leadership had gone from him. "You're sure you don't want me any more?" he said. "Quite sure," Mr. Ronald answered. The man from Broadstairs retired--with his salvage to comfort him.

Number 1 was at the farther extremity of the row of houses. When Mr. Ronald rang the bell, the spies were already posted. The woman loitered on the road, within view of the door. Farnaby was out of sight, round the corner, watching the house over the low wooden palings of the back garden.

A lazy-looking man, in his shirt sleeves, opened the door. "Mrs. Turner at home?" he repeated. "Well, she's at home; but she's too busy to see anybody. What's your pleasure?" Mr. Ronald declined to accept excuses or to answer questions. "I must see Mrs. Turner directly," he said, "on important business." His tone and manner had their effect on the lazy man. "What name?" he asked. Mr. Ronald declined to mention his name. "Give my message," he said. "I won't detain Mrs. Turner more than a minute." The man hesitated--and opened the door of the front parlour. An old woman was fast asleep on a ragged little sofa. The man gave up the front parlour, and tried the back parlour next. It was empty. "Please to wait here," he said--and went away to deliver his message.

The parlour was a miserably furnished room. Through the open window, the patch of back garden was barely visible under fluttering rows of linen hanging out on lines to dry. A pack of dirty cards, and some plain needlework, littered the bare little table. A cheap American clock ticked with stern and steady activity on the mantelpiece. The smell of onions was in the air. A torn newspaper, with stains of beer on it, lay on the floor. There was some sinister influence in the place which affected Mr. Ronald painfully. He felt himself trembling, and sat down on one of the rickety chairs. The minutes followed one another wearily. He heard a trampling of feet in the room above--then a door opened and closed--then the rustle of a woman's dress on the stairs. In a moment more, the handle of the parlour door was turned. He rose, in anticipation of Mrs. Turner's appearance. The door opened. He found himself face to face with his wife.

VI

John Farnaby, posted at the garden paling, suddenly lifted his head and looked towards the open window of the back parlour. He reflected for a moment--and then joined his female companion on the road in front of the house.

"I want you at the back garden," he said. "Come along!"

"How much longer am I to be kept kicking my heels in this wretched hole?" the woman asked sulkily.

"As much longer as I please--if you want to go back to London with the other half of the money." He showed it to her as he spoke. She followed him without another word.

Arrived at the paling, Farnaby pointed to the window, and to the back garden door, which was left ajar. "Speak softly," he whispered. "Do you hear voices in the house?"

"I don't hear what they're talking about, if that's what you mean."

"I don't hear, either. Now mind what I tell you--I have reasons of my own for getting a little nearer to that window. Sit down under the paling, so that you can't be seen from the house. If you hear a row, you may take it for granted that I am found out. In that case, go back to London by the next train, and meet me at the terminus at two o'clock tomorrow afternoon. If nothing happens, wait where you are till you hear from me or see me again."

He laid his hand on the low paling, and vaulted over it. The linen hanging up in the garden to dry offered him a means of concealment (if any one happened to look out of the window) of which he skilfully availed himself. The dust-bin was at the side of the house, situated at a right angle to the parlour window. He was safe behind the bin, provided no one appeared on the path which connected the patch of garden at the back with the patch in front. Here, running the risk, he waited and listened.

The first voice that reached his ears was the voice of Mrs. Ronald. She was speaking with a firmness of tone that astonished him.

"Hear me to the end, Benjamin," she said. "I have a right to ask as much as

that of my husband, and I do ask it. If I had been bent on nothing but saving the reputation of our miserable girl, you would have a right to blame me for keeping you ignorant of the calamity that has fallen on us--"

There the voice of her husband interposed sternly. "Calamity! Say disgrace, everlasting disgrace."

Mrs. Ronald did not notice the interruption. Sadly and patiently she went on.

"But I had a harder trial still to face," she said. "I had to save her, in spite of herself, from the wretch who has brought this infamy on us. He has acted throughout in cold blood; it is his interest to marry her, and from first to last he has plotted to force the marriage on us. For God's sake, don't speak loud! She is in the room above us; if she hears you it will be the death of her. Don't suppose I am talking at random; I have looked at his letters to her; I have got the confession of the servant-girl. Such a confession! Emma is his victim, body and soul. I know it! I know that she sent him money (my money) from this place. I know that the servant (at her instigation) informed him by telegraph of the birth of the child. Oh, Benjamin, don't curse the poor helpless infant--such a sweet little girl! don't think of it! I don't think of it! Show me the letter that brought you here; I want to see the letter. Ah, I can tell you who wrote it! He wrote it. In his own interests; always with his own interests in view. Don't you see it for yourself? If I succeed in keeping this shame and misery a secret from everybody--if I take Emma away, to some place abroad, on pretence of her health--there is an end of his hope of becoming your son-in-law; there is an end of his being taken into the business. Yes! he, the low-lived vagabond who puts up the shop-shutters, he looks forward to being taken into partnership, and succeeding you when you die! Isn't his object in writing that letter as plain to you now as the heaven above us? His one chance is to set your temper in a flame, to provoke the scandal of a discovery--and to force the marriage on us as the only remedy left. Am I wrong in making any sacrifice, rather than bind our girl for life, our own flesh and blood, to such a man as that? Surely you can feel for me, and forgive me, now. How could I own the truth to you, before I left London, knowing you as I do? How could I expect you to be patient, to go into hiding, to pass under a false name--to do all the degrading things that must be done, if we are to keep Emma out of this man's way? No! I know no more than you do where Farnaby is to be found. Hush! there is the door-bell. It's the doctor's time for his visit. I tell you again I don't know--on my sacred word of honour, I don't know where Farnaby is. Oh, be quiet! be quiet! there's the doctor going upstairs! don't let the doctor hear you!"

So far, she had succeeded in composing her husband. But the fury which she had innocently roused in him, in her eagerness to justify herself, now broke beyond all control. "You lie!" he cried furiously. "If you know everything else about it, you know where Farnaby is. I'll be the death of him, if I swing for it on the gallows! Where is he? Where is he?"

A shriek from the upper room silenced him before Mrs. Ronald could speak again. His daughter had heard him; his daughter had recognized his voice.

A cry of terror from her mother echoed the cry from above; the sound of the opening and closing of the door followed instantly. Then there was a momentary silence. Then Mrs. Ronald's voice was heard from the upper room calling to the nurse, asleep in the front parlour. The nurse's gruff tones were just audible, answering from the parlour door. There was another interval of silence; broken by another voice--a stranger's voice--speaking at the open window, close by.

"Follow me upstairs, sir, directly," the voice said in peremptory tones. "As your daughter's medical attendant, I tell you in the plainest terms that you have seriously frightened her. In her critical condition, I decline to answer for her life, unless you make the attempt at least to undo the mischief you have done. Whether you mean it or not, soothe her with kind words; say you have forgiven her. No! I have nothing to do with your domestic troubles; I have only my patient to think of. I don't care what she asks of you, you must give way to her now. If she falls into convulsions, she will die--and her death will be at your door."

So, with feebler and feebler interruptions from Mr. Ronald, the doctor spoke. It ended plainly in his being obeyed. The departing footsteps of the men were the next sounds to be heard. After that, there was a pause of silence--a long pause, broken by Mrs. Ronald, calling again from the upper regions. "Take the child into the back parlour, nurse, and wait till I come to you. It's cooler there, at this time of the day."

The wailing of an infant, and the gruff complaining of the nurse, were the next sounds that reached Farnaby in his hiding place. The nurse was grumbling to herself over the grievance of having been awakened from her sleep. "After being up all night, a person wants rest. There's no rest for anybody in this house. My head's as heavy as lead, and every bone in me has got an ache in it."

Before long, the renewed silence indicated that she had succeeded in hushing the child to sleep. Farnaby forgot the restraints of caution for the

first time. His face flushed with excitement; he ventured nearer to the window, in his eagerness to find out what might happen next. After no long interval, the next sound came--a sound of heavy breathing, which told him that the drowsy nurse was falling asleep again. The window-sill was within reach of his hands. He waited until the heavy breathing deepened to snoring. Then he drew himself up by the window-sill, and looked into the room.

The nurse was fast asleep in an armchair; and the child was fast asleep on her lap.

He dropped softly to the ground again. Taking off his shoes, and putting them in his pockets, he ascended the two or three steps which led to the half-open back garden door. Arrived in the passage, he could just hear them talking upstairs. They were no doubt still absorbed in their troubles; he had only the servant to dread. The splashing of water in the kitchen informed him that she was safely occupied in washing. Slowly and softly he opened the back parlour door, and stole across the room to the nurse's chair.

One of her hands still rested on the child. The serious risk was the risk of waking her, if he lost his presence of mind and hurried it!

He glanced at the American clock on the mantelpiece. The result relieved him; it was not so late as he had feared. He knelt down, to steady himself, as nearly as possible on a level with the nurse's knees. By a hair's breadth at a time, he got both hands under the child. By a hair's breadth at a time, he drew the child away from her; leaving her hand resting on her lap by degrees so gradual that the lightest sleeper could not have felt the change. That done (barring accidents), all was done. Keeping the child resting easily on his left arm, he had his right hand free to shut the door again. Arrived at the garden steps, a slight change passed over the sleeping infant's face--the delicate little creature shivered as it felt the full flow of the open air. He softly laid over its face a corner of the woollen shawl in which it was wrapped. The child reposed as quietly on his arm as if it had still been on the nurse's lap.

In a minute more he was at the paling. The woman rose to receive him, with the first smile that had crossed her face since they had left London.

"So you've got the baby," she said, "Well, you are a deep one!"

"Take it," he answered irritably. "We haven't a moment to lose."

Only stopping to put on his shoes, he led the way towards the more central part of the town. The first person he met directed him to the railway station. It was close by. In five minutes more the woman and the baby were safe in the train to London.

"There's the other half of the money," he said, handing it to her through the carriage window.

The woman eyed the child in her arms with a frowning expression of doubt. "All very well as long as it lasts," she said. "And what after that?"

"Of course, I shall call and see you," he answered.

She looked hard at him, and expressed the whole value she set on that assurance in four words. "Of course you will!"

The train started for London. Farnaby watched it, as it left the platform, with a look of unfeigned relief. "There!" he thought to himself. "Emma's reputation is safe enough now! When we are married, we mustn't have a love-child in the way of our prospects in life."

Leaving the station, he stopped at the refreshment room, and drank a glass of brandy-and-water. "Something to screw me up," he thought, "for what is to come." What was to come (after he had got rid of the child) had been carefully considered by him, on the journey to Ramsgate. "Emma's husband-that-is-to-be"--he had reasoned it out--"will naturally be the first person Emma wants to see, when the loss of the baby has upset the house. If Old Ronald has a grain of affection left in him, he must let her marry me after that!"

Acting on this view of his position, he took the way that led back to Slains Row, and rang the door-bell as became a visitor who had no reasons for concealment now.

The household was doubtless already disorganized by the discovery of the child's disappearance. Neither master nor servant was active in answering the bell. Farnaby submitted to be kept waiting with perfect composure. There are occasions on which a handsome man is bound to put his personal advantages to their best use. He took out his pocket-comb, and touched up the arrangement of his whiskers with a skilled and gentle hand. Approaching footsteps made themselves heard along the passage at last. Farnaby put back his comb, and buttoned his coat briskly. "Now for it!" he said, as the door was opened at last.