PROLOGUE

I. THE TRAVELERS.

It was the opening of the season of eighteen hundred and thirty-two, at the Baths of Wildbad.

The evening shadows were beginning to gather over the quiet little German town, and the diligence was expected every minute. Before the door of the principal inn, waiting the arrival of the first visitors of the year, were assembled the three notable personages of Wildbad, accompanied by their wives--the mayor, representing the inhabitants; the doctor, representing the waters; the landlord, representing his own establishment. Beyond this select circle, grouped snugly about the trim little square in front of the inn, appeared the towns-people in general, mixed here and there with the country people, in their quaint German costume, placidly expectant of the diligence--the men in short black jackets, tight black breeches, and three-cornered beaver hats; the women with their long light hair hanging in one thickly plaited tail behind them, and the waists of their short woolen gowns inserted modestly in the region of their shoulder-blades. Round the outer edge of the assemblage thus formed, flying detachments of plump white-headed children careered in perpetual motion; while, mysteriously apart from the rest of the inhabitants, the musicians of the Baths stood collected in one lost corner, waiting the appearance of the first visitors to play the first tune of the season in the form of a serenade. The light of a May evening was still bright on the tops of the great wooded hills watching high over the town on the right hand and the left; and the cool breeze that comes before sunset came keenly fragrant here with the balsamic odor of the first of the Black Forest.

"Mr. Landlord," said the mayor's wife (giving the landlord his title), "have you any foreign guests coming on this first day of the season?"

"Madame Mayoress," replied the landlord (returning the compliment), "I have two. They have written--the one by the hand of his servant, the other by his own hand apparently--to order their rooms; and they are from England, both, as I think by their names. If you ask me to pronounce those names, my tongue hesitates; if you ask me to spell them, here they are, letter by letter, first and second in their order as they come. First, a high-born stranger (by title Mister) who introduces himself in eight letters, A, r, m, a, d, a, l, e--and comes ill in his own carriage. Second, a high-born stranger (by title Mister also), who introduces himself in four letters--N, e, a, l--and

comes ill in the diligence. His excellency of the eight letters writes to me (by his servant) in French; his excellency of the four letters writes to me in German. The rooms of both are ready. I know no more."

"Perhaps," suggested the mayor's wife, "Mr. Doctor has heard from one or both of these illustrious strangers?"

"From one only, Madam Mayoress; but not, strictly speaking, from the person himself. I have received a medical report of his excellency of the eight letters, and his case seems a bad one. God help him!"

"The diligence!" cried a child from the outskirts of the crowd.

The musicians seized their instruments, and silence fell on the whole community. From far away in the windings of the forest gorge, the ring of horses' bells came faintly clear through the evening stillness. Which carriage was approaching--the private carriage with Mr. Armadale, or the public carriage with Mr. Neal?

"Play, my friends!" cried the mayor to the musicians. "Public or private, here are the first sick people of the season. Let them find us cheerful."

The band played a lively dance tune, and the children in the square footed it merrily to the music. At the same moment, their elders near the inn door drew aside, and disclosed the first shadow of gloom that fell over the gayety and beauty of the scene. Through the opening made on either hand, a little procession of stout country girls advanced, each drawing after her an empty chair on wheels; each in waiting (and knitting while she waited) for the paralyzed wretches who came helpless by hundreds then--who come helpless by thousands now--to the waters of Wildbad for relief.

While the band played, while the children danced, while the buzz of many talkers deepened, while the strong young nurses of the coming cripples knitted impenetrably, a woman's insatiable curiosity about other women asserted itself in the mayor's wife. She drew the landlady aside, and whispered a question to her on the spot.

"A word more, ma'am," said the mayor's wife, "about the two strangers from England. Are their letters explicit? Have they got any ladies with them?"

"The one by the diligence--no," replied the landlady. "But the one by the private carriage--yes. He comes with a child; he comes with a nurse; and," concluded the landlady, skillfully keeping the main point of interest till the

last, "he comes with a Wife."

The mayoress brightened; the doctoress (assisting at the conference) brightened; the landlady nodded significantly. In the minds of all three the same thought started into life at the same moment--"We shall see the Fashions!"

In a minute more, there was a sudden movement in the crowd; and a chorus of voices proclaimed that the travelers were at hand.

By this time the coming vehicle was in sight, and all further doubt was at an end. It was the diligence that now approached by the long street leading into the square--the diligence (in a dazzling new coat of yellow paint) that delivered the first visitors of the season at the inn door. Of the ten travelers released from the middle compartment and the back compartment of the carriage--all from various parts of Germany--three were lifted out helpless, and were placed in the chairs on wheels to be drawn to their lodgings in the town. The front compartment contained two passengers only--Mr. Neal and his traveling servant. With an arm on either side to assist him, the stranger (whose malady appeared to be locally confined to a lameness in one of his feet) succeeded in descending the steps of the carriage easily enough. While he steadied himself on the pavement by the help of his stick--looking not over-patiently toward the musicians who were serenading him with the waltz in "Der Freischutz"--his personal appearance rather damped the enthusiasm of the friendly little circle assembled to welcome him. He was a lean, tall, serious, middle-aged man, with a cold gray eye and a long upper lip, with overhanging eyebrows and high cheek-bones; a man who looked what he was--every inch a Scotchman.

"Where is the proprietor of this hotel?" he asked, speaking in the German language, with a fluent readiness of expression, and an icy coldness of manner. "Fetch the doctor," he continued, when the landlord had presented himself, "I want to see him immediately."

"I am here already, sir," said the doctor, advancing from the circle of friends, "and my services are entirely at your disposal."

"Thank you," said Mr. Neal, looking at the doctor, as the rest of us look at a dog when we have whistled and the dog has come. "I shall be glad to consult you to-morrow morning, at ten o'clock, about my own case. I only want to trouble you now with a message which I have undertaken to deliver. We overtook a traveling carriage on the road here with a gentleman in it--an Englishman, I believe--who appeared to be seriously ill. A lady who was with

him begged me to see you immediately on my arrival, and to secure your professional assistance in removing the patient from the carriage. Their courier has met with an accident, and has been left behind on the road, and they are obliged to travel very slowly. If you are here in an hour, you will be here in time to receive them. That is the message. Who is this gentleman who appears to be anxious to speak to me? The mayor? If you wish to see my passport, sir, my servant will show it to you. No? You wish to welcome me to the place, and to offer your services? I am infinitely flattered. If you have any authority to shorten the performances of your town band, you would be doing me a kindness to exert it. My nerves are irritable, and I dislike music. Where is the landlord? No; I want to see my rooms. I don't want your arm; I can get upstairs with the help of my stick. Mr. Mayor and Mr. Doctor, we need not detain one another any longer. I wish you good-night."

Both mayor and doctor looked after the Scotchman as he limped upstairs, and shook their heads together in mute disapproval of him. The ladies, as usual, went a step further, and expressed their opinions openly in the plainest words. The case under consideration (so far as they were concerned) was the scandalous case of a man who had passed them over entirely without notice. Mrs. Mayor could only attribute such an outrage to the native ferocity of a savage. Mrs. Doctor took a stronger view still, and considered it as proceeding from the inbred brutality of a hog.

The hour of waiting for the traveling-carriage wore on, and the creeping night stole up the hillsides softly. One by one the stars appeared, and the first lights twinkled in the windows of the inn. As the darkness came, the last idlers deserted the square; as the darkness came, the mighty silence of the forest above flowed in on the valley, and strangely and suddenly hushed the lonely little town.

The hour of waiting wore out, and the figure of the doctor, walking backward and forward anxiously, was still the only living figure left in the square. Five minutes, ten minutes, twenty minutes, were counted out by the doctor's watch, before the first sound came through the night silence to warn him of the approaching carriage. Slowly it emerged into the square, at the walking pace of the horses, and drew up, as a hearse might have drawn up, at the door of the inn.

"Is the doctor here?" asked a woman's voice, speaking, out of the darkness of the carriage, in the French language.

"I am here, madam," replied the doctor, taking a light from the landlord's

hand and opening the carriage door.

The first face that the light fell on was the face of the lady who had just spoken--a young, darkly beautiful woman, with the tears standing thick and bright in her eager black eyes. The second face revealed was the face of a shriveled old negress, sitting opposite the lady on the back seat. The third was the face of a little sleeping child in the negress's lap. With a quick gesture of impatience, the lady signed to the nurse to leave the carriage first with the child. "Pray take them out of the way," she said to the landlady; "pray take them to their room." She got out herself when her request had been complied with. Then the light fell clear for the first time on the further side of the carriage, and the fourth traveler was disclosed to view.

He lay helpless on a mattress, supported by a stretcher; his hair, long and disordered, under a black skull-cap; his eyes wide open, rolling to and fro ceaselessly anxious; the rest of his face as void of all expression of the character within him, and the thought within him, as if he had been dead. There was no looking at him now, and guessing what he might once have been. The leaden blank of his face met every question as to his age, his rank, his temper, and his looks which that face might once have answered, in impenetrable silence. Nothing spoke for him now but the shock that had struck him with the death-in-life of paralysis. The doctor's eye questioned his lower limbs, and Death-in-Life answered, I am here. The doctor's eye, rising attentively by way of his hands and arms, questioned upward and upward to the muscles round his mouth, and Death-in-Life answered, I am coming.

In the face of a calamity so unsparing and so dreadful, there was nothing to be said. The silent sympathy of help was all that could be offered to the woman who stood weeping at the carriage door.

As they bore him on his bed across the hall of the hotel, his wandering eyes encountered the face of his wife. They rested on her for a moment, and in that moment he spoke.

"The child?" he said in English, with a slow, thick, laboring articulation.

"The child is safe upstairs," she answered, faintly.

"My desk?"

"It is in my hands. Look! I won't trust it to anybody; I am taking care of it for you myself."

He closed his eyes for the first time after that answer, and said no more. Tenderly and skillfully he was carried up the stairs, with his wife on one side of him, and the doctor (ominously silent) on the other. The landlord and the servants following saw the door of his room open and close on him; heard the lady burst out crying hysterically as soon as she was alone with the doctor and the sick man; saw the doctor come out, half an hour later, with his ruddy face a shade paler than usual; pressed him eagerly for information, and received but one answer to all their inquiries--"Wait till I have seen him to-morrow. Ask me nothing to-night." They all knew the doctor's ways, and they augured ill when he left them hurriedly with that reply.

So the two first English visitors of the year came to the Baths of Wildbad in the season of eighteen hundred and thirty-two.

II. THE SOLID SIDE OF THE SCOTCH CHARACTER.

AT ten o'clock the next morning, Mr. Neal--waiting for the medical visit which he had himself appointed for that hour--looked at his watch, and discovered, to his amazement, that he was waiting in vain. It was close on eleven when the door opened at last, and the doctor entered the room.

"I appointed ten o'clock for your visit," said Mr. Neal. "In my country, a medical man is a punctual man."

"In my country," returned the doctor, without the least ill-humor, "a medical man is exactly like other men--he is at the mercy of accidents. Pray grant me your pardon, sir, for being so long after my time; I have been detained by a very distressing case--the case of Mr. Armadale, whose traveling-carriage you passed on the road yesterday."

Mr. Neal looked at his medical attendant with a sour surprise. There was a latent anxiety in the doctor's eye, a latent preoccupation in the doctor's manner, which he was at a loss to account for. For a moment the two faces confronted each other silently, in marked national contrast--the Scotchman's, long and lean, hard and regular; the German's, plump and florid, soft and shapeless. One face looked as if it had never been young; the other, as if it would never grow old.

"Might I venture to remind you," said Mr. Neal, "that the case now under consideration is MY case, and not Mr. Armadale's?"

"Certainly," replied the doctor, still vacillating between the case he had come to see and the case he had just left. "You appear to be suffering from lameness; let me look at your foot."

Mr. Neal's malady, however serious it might be in his own estimation, was of no extraordinary importance in a medical point of view. He was suffering from a rheumatic affection of the ankle-joint. The necessary questions were asked and answered and the necessary baths were prescribed. In ten minutes the consultation was at an end, and the patient was waiting in significant silence for the medical adviser to take his leave.

"I cannot conceal from myself," said the doctor, rising, and hesitating a little, "that I am intruding on you. But I am compelled to beg your indulgence if I return to the subject of Mr. Armadale."

"May I ask what compels you?"

"The duty which I owe as a Christian," answered the doctor, "to a dying man."

Mr. Neal started. Those who touched his sense of religious duty touched the quickest sense in his nature.

"You have established your claim on my attention," he said, gravely. "My time is yours."

"I will not abuse your kindness," replied the doctor, resuming his chair. "I will be as short as I can. Mr. Armadale's case is briefly this: He has passed the greater part of his life in the West Indies--a wild life, and a vicious life, by his own confession. Shortly after his marriage--now some three years since--the first symptoms of an approaching paralytic affection began to show themselves, and his medical advisers ordered him away to try the climate of Europe. Since leaving the West Indies he has lived principally in Italy, with no benefit to his health. From Italy, before the last seizure attacked him, he removed to Switzerland, and from Switzerland he has been sent to this place. So much I know from his doctor's report; the rest I can tell you from my own personal experience. Mr. Armadale has been sent to Wildbad too late: he is virtually a dead man. The paralysis is fast spreading upward, and disease of the lower part of the spine has already taken place. He can still move his hands a little, but he can hold nothing in his fingers. He can still articulate, but he may wake speechless to-morrow or next day. If I give him a week more to live, I give him what I honestly believe to be the utmost length of his span. At his own request I told him, as carefully and as tenderly as I could, what I have just told you. The result was very distressing; the violence of the patient's agitation was a violence which I despair of describing to you. I took the liberty of asking him whether his affairs were unsettled. Nothing of the sort. His will is in the hands of his executor in London, and he leaves his wife and child well provided for. My next question succeeded better; it hit the mark: 'Have you something on your mind to do before you die which is not done yet?' He gave a great gasp of relief, which said, as no words could have said it, Yes. 'Can I help you?' 'Yes. I have something to write that I must write; can you make me hold a pen?'

"He might as well have asked me if I could perform a miracle. I could only say No. 'If I dictate the words,' he went on, 'can you write what I tell you to write?' Once more I could only say No I understand a little English, but I can neither speak it nor write it. Mr. Armadale understands French when it is spoken (as I speak it to him) slowly, but he cannot express himself in that

language; and of German he is totally ignorant. In this difficulty, I said, what any one else in my situation would have said: 'Why ask me? there is Mrs. Armadale at your service in the next room.' Before I could get up from my chair to fetch her, he stopped me--not by words, but by a look of horror which fixed me, by main force of astonishment, in my place. 'Surely,' I said, 'your wife is the fittest person to write for you as you desire?' 'The last person under heaven!' he answered. 'What!' I said, 'you ask me, a foreigner and a stranger, to write words at your dictation which you keep a secret from your wife!' Conceive my astonishment when he answered me, without a moment's hesitation, 'Yes!' I sat lost; I sat silent. 'If you can't write English,' he said, 'find somebody who can.' I tried to remonstrate. He burst into a dreadful moaning cry--a dumb entreaty, like the entreaty of a dog. 'Hush! hush!' I said, 'I will find somebody.' 'To-day!' he broke out, 'before my speech fails me, like my hand.' 'To-day, in an hour's time.' He shut his eyes; he quieted himself instantly. 'While I am waiting for you,' he said, 'let me see my little boy.' He had shown no tenderness when he spoke of his wife, but I saw the tears on his cheeks when he asked for his child. My profession, sir, has not made me so hard a man as you might think; and my doctor's heart was as heavy, when I went out to fetch the child, as if I had not been a doctor at all. I am afraid you think this rather weak on my part?"

The doctor looked appealingly at Mr. Neal. He might as well have looked at a rock in the Black Forest. Mr. Neal entirely declined to be drawn by any doctor in Christendom out of the regions of plain fact.

"Go on," he said. "I presume you have not told me all that you have to tell me, yet?"

"Surely you understand my object in coming here, now?" returned the other.

"Your object is plain enough, at last. You invite me to connect myself blindfold with a matter which is in the last degree suspicious, so far. I decline giving you any answer until I know more than I know now. Did you think it necessary to inform this man's wife of what had passed between you, and to ask her for an explanation?"

"Of course I thought it necessary!" said the doctor, indignant at the reflection on his humanity which the question seemed to imply. "If ever I saw a woman fond of her husband, and sorry for her husband, it is this unhappy Mrs. Armadale. As soon as we were left alone together, I sat down by her side, and I took her hand in mine. Why not? I am an ugly old man, and I may allow myself such liberties as these!"

"Excuse me," said the impenetrable Scotchman. "I beg to suggest that you are losing the thread of the narrative."

"Nothing more likely," returned the doctor, recovering his good humor. "It is in the habit of my nation to be perpetually losing the thread; and it is evidently in the habit of yours, sir, to be perpetually finding it. What an example here of the order of the universe, and the everlasting fitness of things!"

"Will you oblige me, once for all, by confining yourself to the facts," persisted Mr. Neal, frowning impatiently. "May I inquire, for my own information, whether Mrs. Armadale could tell you what it is her husband wishes me to write, and why it is that he refuses to let her write for him?"

"There is my thread found--and thank you for finding it!" said the doctor. "You shall hear what Mrs. Armadale had to tell me, in Mrs. Armadale's own words. 'The cause that now shuts me out of his confidence,' she said, 'is, I firmly believe, the same cause that has always shut me out of his heart. I am the wife he has wedded, but I am not the woman he loves. I knew when he married me that another man had won from him the woman he loved. I thought I could make him forget her. I hoped when I married him; I hoped again when I bore him a son. Need I tell you the end of my hopes--you have seen it for yourself.' (Wait, sir, I entreat you! I have not lost the thread again; I am following it inch by inch.) 'Is this all you know?' I asked. 'All I knew,' she said, 'till a short time since. It was when we were in Switzerland, and when his illness was nearly at its worst, that news came to him by accident of that other woman who has been the shadow and the poison of my life--news that she (like me) had borne her husband a son. On the instant of his making that discovery--a trifling discovery, if ever there was one yet--a mortal fear seized on him: not for me, not for himself; a fear for his own child. The same day (without a word to me) he sent for the doctor. I was mean, wicked, what you please--I listened at the door. I heard him say: I have something to tell my son, when my son grows old enough to understand me. Shall I live to tell it? The doctor would say nothing certain. The same night (still without a word to me) he locked himself into his room. What would any woman, treated as I was, have done in my place? She would have done as I did--she would have listened again. I heard him say to himself: I shall not live to tell it: I must; write it before I die. I heard his pen scrape, scrape, scrape over the paper; I heard him groaning and sobbing as he wrote; I implored him for God's sake to let me in. The cruel pen went scrape, scrape, scrape; the cruel pen was all the answer he gave me. I waited at the door--hours--I don't know how long. On a sudden, the pen stopped; and I heard no more. I whispered through the keyhole softly; I said

I was cold and weary with waiting; I said, Oh, my love, let me in! Not even the cruel pen answered me now: silence answered me. With all the strength of my miserable hands I beat at the door. The servants came up and broke it in. We were too late; the harm was done. Over that fatal letter, the stroke had struck him--over that fatal letter, we found him paralyzed as you see him now. Those words which he wants you to write are the words he would have written himself if the stroke had spared him till the morning. From that time to this there has been a blank place left in the letter; and it is that blank place which he has just asked you to fill up.'--In those words Mrs. Armadale spoke to me; in those words you have the sum and substance of all the information I can give. Say, if you please, sir, have I kept the thread at last? Have I shown you the necessity which brings me here from your countryman's death-bed?"

"Thus far," said Mr. Neal, "you merely show me that you are exciting yourself. This is too serious a matter to be treated as you are treating it now. You have involved Me in the business, and I insist on seeing my way plainly. Don't raise your hands; your hands are not a part of the question. If I am to be concerned in the completion of this mysterious letter, it is only an act of justifiable prudence on my part to inquire what the letter is about. Mrs. Armadale appears to have favored you with an infinite number of domestic particulars--in return, I presume, for your polite attention in taking her by the hand. May I ask what she could tell you about her husband's letter, so far as her husband has written it?"

"Mrs. Armadale could tell me nothing," replied the doctor, with a sudden formality in his manner, which showed that his forbearance was at last failing him. "Before she was composed enough to think of the letter, her husband had asked for it, and had caused it to be locked up in his desk. She knows that he has since, time after time, tried to finish it, and that, time after time, the pen has dropped from his fingers. She knows, when all other hope of his restoration was at an end, that his medical advisers encouraged him to hope in the famous waters of this place. And last, she knows how that hope has ended; for she knows what I told her husband this morning."

The frown which had been gathering latterly on Mr. Neal's face deepened and darkened. He looked at the doctor as if the doctor had personally offended him.

"The more I think of the position you are asking me to take," he said, "the less I like it. Can you undertake to say positively that Mr. Armadale is in his right mind?"

"Yes; as positively as words can say it."

"Does his wife sanction your coming here to request my interference?"

"His wife sends me to you--the only Englishman in Wildbad--to write for your dying countryman what he cannot write for himself; and what no one else in this place but you can write for him."

That answer drove Mr. Neal back to the last inch of ground left him to stand on. Even on that inch the Scotchman resisted still.

"Wait a little!" he said. "You put it strongly; let us be quite sure you put it correctly as well. Let us be quite sure there is nobody to take this responsibility but myself. There is a mayor in Wildbad, to begin with--a man who possesses an official character to justify his interference."

"A man of a thousand," said the doctor. "With one fault--he knows no language but his own."

"There is an English legation at Stuttgart," persisted Mr. Neal.

"And there are miles on miles of the forest between this and Stuttgart," rejoined the doctor. "If we sent this moment, we could get no help from the legation before to-morrow; and it is as likely as not, in the state of this dying man's articulation, that to-morrow may find him speechless. I don't know whether his last wishes are wishes harmless to his child and to others, wishes hurtful to his child and to others; but I do know that they must be fulfilled at once or never, and that you are the only man that can help him."

That open declaration brought the discussion to a close. It fixed Mr. Neal fast between the two alternatives of saying Yes, and committing an act of imprudence, or of saying No, and committing an act of inhumanity. There was a silence of some minutes. The Scotchman steadily reflected; and the German steadily watched him.

The responsibility of saying the next words rested on Mr. Neal, and in course of time Mr. Neal took it. He rose from his chair with a sullen sense of injury lowering on his heavy eyebrows, and working sourly in the lines at the corners of his mouth.

"My position is forced on me," he said. "I have no choice but to accept it."

The doctor's impulsive nature rose in revolt against the merciless brevity and gracelessness of that reply. "I wish to God," he broke out fervently, "I knew English enough to take your place at Mr. Armadale's bedside!"

"Bating your taking the name of the Almighty in vain," answered the Scotchman, "I entirely agree with you. I wish you did."

Without another word on either side, they left the room together--the doctor leading the way.

III. THE WRECK OF THE TIMBER SHIP.

NO one answered the doctor's knock when he and his companion reached the antechamber door of Mr. Armadale's apartments. They entered unannounced; and when they looked into the sitting-room, the sitting-room was empty.

"I must see Mrs. Armadale," said Mr. Neal. "I decline acting in the matter unless Mrs. Armadale authorizes my interference with her own lips."

"Mrs. Armadale is probably with her husband," replied the doctor. He approached a door at the inner end of the sitting-room while he spoke--hesitated--and, turning round again, looked at his sour companion anxiously. "I am afraid I spoke a little harshly, sir, when we were leaving your room," he said. "I beg your pardon for it, with all my heart. Before this poor afflicted lady comes in, will you--will you excuse my asking your utmost gentleness and consideration for her?"

"No, sir," retorted the other harshly; "I won't excuse you. What right have I given you to think me wanting in gentleness and consideration toward anybody?"

The doctor saw it was useless. "I beg your pardon again," he said, resignedly, and left the unapproachable stranger to himself.

Mr. Neal walked to the window, and stood there, with his eyes mechanically fixed on the prospect, composing his mind for the coming interview.

It was midday; the sun shone bright and warm; and all the little world of Wildbad was alive and merry in the genial springtime. Now and again heavy wagons, with black-faced carters in charge, rolled by the window, bearing their precious lading of charcoal from the forest. Now and again, hurled over the headlong current of the stream that runs through the town, great lengths of timber, loosely strung together in interminable series--with the booted raftsmen, pole in hand, poised watchful at either end--shot swift and serpent-like past the houses on their course to the distant Rhine. High and steep above the gabled wooden buildings on the river-bank, the great hillsides, crested black with firs, shone to the shining heavens in a glory of lustrous green. In and out, where the forest foot-paths wound from the grass through the trees, from the trees over the grass, the bright spring dresses of women and children, on the search for wild flowers, traveled to and fro in the lofty distance like spots of moving light. Below, on the walk by the stream side, the booths of the little bazar that had opened punctually

with the opening season showed all their glittering trinkets, and fluttered in the balmy air their splendor of many-colored flags. Longingly, here the children looked at the show; patiently the sunburned lasses plied their knitting as they paced the walk; courteously the passing townspeople, by fours and fives, and the passing visitors, by ones and twos, greeted each other, hat in hand; and slowly, slowly, the cripple and the helpless in their chairs on wheels came out in the cheerful noontide with the rest, and took their share of the blessed light that cheers, of the blessed sun that shines for all.

On this scene the Scotchman looked, with eyes that never noted its beauty, with a mind far away from every lesson that it taught. One by one he meditated the words he should say when the wife came in. One by one he pondered over the conditions he might impose before he took the pen in hand at the husband's bedside.

"Mrs. Armadale is here," said the doctor's voice, interposing suddenly between his reflections and himself.

He turned on the instant, and saw before him, with the pure midday light shining full on her, a woman of the mixed blood of the European and the African race, with the Northern delicacy in the shape of her face, and the Southern richness in its color--a woman in the prime of her beauty, who moved with an inbred grace, who looked with an inbred fascination, whose large, languid black eyes rested on him gratefully, whose little dusky hand offered itself to him in mute expression of her thanks, with the welcome that is given to the coming of a friend. For the first time in his life the Scotchman was taken by surprise. Every self-preservative word that he had been meditating but an instant since dropped out of his memory. His thrice impenetrable armor of habitual suspicion, habitual self-discipline, and habitual reserve, which had never fallen from him in a woman's presence before, fell from him in this woman's presence, and brought him to his knees, a conquered man. He took the hand she offered him, and bowed over it his first honest homage to the sex, in silence.

She hesitated on her side. The quick feminine perception which, in happier circumstances, would have pounced on the secret of his embarrassment in an instant, failed her now. She attributed his strange reception of her to pride, to reluctance--to any cause but the unexpected revelation of her own beauty. "I have no words to thank you," she said, faintly, trying to propitiate him. "I should only distress you if I tried to speak." Her lip began to tremble, she drew back a little, and turned away her head in silence.

The doctor, who had been standing apart, quietly observant in a corner, advanced before Mr. Neal could interfere, and led Mrs. Armadale to a chair. "Don't be afraid of him," whispered the good man, patting her gently on the shoulder. "He was hard as iron in my hands, but I think, by the look of him, he will be soft as wax in yours. Say the words I told you to say, and let us take him to your husband's room, before those sharp wits of his have time to recover themselves."

She roused her sinking resolution, and advanced half-way to the window to meet Mr. Neal. "My kind friend, the doctor, has told me, sir, that your only hesitation in coming here is a hesitation on my account," she said, her head drooping a little, and her rich color fading away while she spoke. "I am deeply grateful, but I entreat you not to think of me. What my husband wishes--" Her voice faltered; she waited resolutely, and recovered herself. "What my husband wishes in his last moments, I wish too."

This time Mr. Neal was composed enough to answer her. In low, earnest tones, he entreated her to say no more. "I was only anxious to show you every consideration," he said. "I am only anxious now to spare you every distress." As he spoke, something like a glow of color rose slowly on his sallow face. Her eyes were looking at him, softly attentive; and he thought guiltily of his meditations at the window before she came in.

The doctor saw his opportunity. He opened the door that led into Mr. Armadale's room, and stood by it, waiting silently. Mrs. Armadale entered first. In a minute more the door was closed again; and Mr. Neal stood committed to the responsibility that had been forced on him--committed beyond recall.

The room was decorated in the gaudy continental fashion, and the warm sunlight was shining in joyously. Cupids and flowers were painted on the ceiling; bright ribbons looped up the white window-curtains; a smart gilt clock ticked on a velvet-covered mantelpiece; mirrors gleamed on the walls, and flowers in all the colors of the rainbow speckled the carpet. In the midst of the finery, and the glitter, and the light, lay the paralyzed man, with his wandering eyes, and his lifeless lower face--his head propped high with many pillows; his helpless hands laid out over the bed-clothes like the hands of a corpse. By the bed head stood, grim, and old, and silent, the shriveled black nurse; and on the counter-pane, between his father's outspread hands, lay the child, in his little white frock, absorbed in the enjoyment of a new toy. When the door opened, and Mrs. Armadale led the way in, the boy was tossing his plaything--a soldier on horseback--backward and forward over the helpless hands on either side of him; and the father's

wandering eyes were following the toy to and fro, with a stealthy and ceaseless vigilance--a vigilance as of a wild animal, terrible to see.

The moment Mr. Neal appeared in the doorway, those restless eyes stopped, looked up, and fastened on the stranger with a fierce eagerness of inquiry. Slowly the motionless lips struggled into movement. With thick, hesitating articulation, they put the question which the eyes asked mutely, into words: "Are you the man?"

Mr. Neal advanced to the bedside, Mrs. Armadale drawing back from it as he approached, and waiting with the doctor at the further end of the room. The child looked up, toy in hand, as the stranger came near, opened his bright brown eyes in momentary astonishment, and then went on with his game.

"I have been made acquainted with your sad situation, sir," said Mr. Neal; "and I have come here to place my services at your disposal--services which no one but myself, as your medical attendant informs me, is in a position to render you in this strange place. My name is Neal. I am a writer to the signet in Edinburgh; and I may presume to say for myself that any confidence you wish to place in me will be confidence not improperly bestowed."

The eyes of the beautiful wife were not confusing him now. He spoke to the helpless husband quietly and seriously, without his customary harshness, and with a grave compassion in his manner which presented him at his best. The sight of the death-bed had steadied him.

"You wish me to write something for you?" he resumed, after waiting for a reply, and waiting in vain.

"Yes!" said the dying man, with the all-mastering impatience which his tongue was powerless to express, glittering angrily in his eye. "My hand is gone, and my speech is going. Write!"

Before there was time to speak again, Mr. Neal heard the rustling of a woman's dress, and the quick creaking of casters on the carpet behind him. Mrs. Armadale was moving the writing-table across the room to the foot of the bed. If he was to set up those safeguards of his own devising that were to bear him harmless through all results to come, now was the time, or never. He, kept his back turned on Mrs. Armadale, and put his precautionary question at once in the plainest terms.

"May I ask, sir, before I take the pen in hand, what it is you wish me to write?"

The angry eyes of the paralyzed man glittered brighter and brighter. His lips opened and closed again. He made no reply.

Mr. Neal tried another precautionary question, in a new direction.

"When I have written what you wish me to write," he asked, "what is to be done with it?"

This time the answer came:

"Seal it up in my presence, and post it to my ex--"

His laboring articulation suddenly stopped and he looked piteously in the questioner's face for the next word.

"Do you mean your executor?"

"Yes."

"It is a letter, I suppose, that I am to post?" There was no answer. "May I ask if it is a letter altering your will?"

"Nothing of the sort."

Mr. Neal considered a little. The mystery was thickening. The one way out of it, so far, was the way traced faintly through that strange story of the unfinished letter which the doctor had repeated to him in Mrs. Armadale's words. The nearer he approached his unknown responsibility, the more ominous it seemed of something serious to come. Should he risk another question before he pledged himself irrevocably? As the doubt crossed his mind, he felt Mrs. Armadale's silk dress touch him on the side furthest from her husband. Her delicate dark hand was laid gently on his arm; her full deep African eyes looked at him in submissive entreaty. "My husband is very anxious," she whispered. "Will you quiet his anxiety, sir, by taking your place at the writing-table?"

It was from her lips that the request came--from the lips of the person who had the best right to hesitate, the wife who was excluded from the secret! Most men in Mr. Neal's position would have given up all their safeguards on the spot. The Scotchman gave them all up but one.

"I will write what you wish me to write," he said, addressing Mr. Armadale. "I

will seal it in your presence; and I will post it to your executor myself. But, in engaging to do this, I must beg you to remember that I am acting entirely in the dark; and I must ask you to excuse me, if I reserve my own entire freedom of action, when your wishes in relation to the writing and the posting of the letter have been fulfilled."

"Do you give me your promise?"

"If you want my promise, sir, I will give it--subject to the condition I have just named."

"Take your condition, and keep your promise. My desk," he added, looking at his wife for the first time.

She crossed the room eagerly to fetch the desk from a chair in a corner. Returning with it, she made a passing sign to the negress, who still stood, grim and silent, in the place that she had occupied from the first. The woman advanced, obedient to the sign, to take the child from the bed. At the instant when she touched him, the father's eyes--fixed previously on the desk--turned on her with the stealthy quickness of a cat. "No!" he said. "No!" echoed the fresh voice of the boy, still charmed with his plaything, and still liking his place on the bed. The negress left the room, and the child, in high triumph, trotted his toy soldier up and down on the bedclothes that lay rumpled over his father's breast. His mother's lovely face contracted with a pang of jealousy as she looked at him.

"Shall I open your desk?" she asked, pushing back the child's plaything sharply while she spoke. An answering look from her husband guided her hand to the place under his pillow where the key was hidden. She opened the desk, and disclosed inside some small sheets of manuscript pinned together. "These?" she inquired, producing them.

"Yes," he said. "You can go now."

The Scotchman sitting at the writing-table, the doctor stirring a stimulant mixture in a corner, looked at each other with an anxiety in both their faces which they could neither of them control. The words that banished the wife from the room were spoken. The moment had come.

"You can go now," said Mr. Armadale, for the second time.

She looked at the child, established comfortably on the bed, and an ashy paleness spread slowly over her face. She looked at the fatal letter which

was a sealed secret to her, and a torture of jealous suspicion--suspicion of that other woman who had been the shadow and the poison of her life--wrung her to the heart. After moving a few steps from the bedside, she stopped, and came back again. Armed with the double courage of her love and her despair, she pressed her lips on her dying husband's cheek, and pleaded with him for the last time. Her burning tears dropped on his face as she whispered to him: "Oh, Allan, think how I have loved you! think how hard I have tried to make you happy! think how soon I shall lose you! Oh, my own love! don't, don't send me away!"

The words pleaded for her; the kiss pleaded for her; the recollection of the love that had been given to him, and never returned, touched the heart of the fast-sinking man as nothing had touched it since the day of his marriage. A heavy sigh broke from him. He looked at her, and hesitated.

"Let me stay," she whispered, pressing her face closer to his.

"It will only distress you," he whispered back.

"Nothing distresses me, but being sent away from you!"

He waited. She saw that he was thinking, and waited too.

"If I let you stay a little--?"

"Yes! yes!"

"Will you go when I tell you?"

"I will."

"On your oath?"

The fetters that bound his tongue seemed to be loosened for a moment in the great outburst of anxiety which forced that question to his lips. He spoke those startling words as he had spoken no words yet.

"On my oath!" she repeated, and, dropping on her knees at the bedside, passionately kissed his hand. The two strangers in the room turned their heads away by common consent. In the silence that followed, the one sound stirring was the small sound of the child's toy, as he moved it hither and thither on the bed.

The doctor was the first who broke the spell of stillness which had fallen on all the persons present. He approached the patient, and examined him anxiously. Mrs. Armadale rose from her knees; and, first waiting for her husband's permission, carried the sheets of manuscript which she had taken out of the desk to the table at which Mr. Neal was waiting. Flushed and eager, more beautiful than ever in the vehement agitation which still possessed her, she stooped over him as she put the letter into his hands, and, seizing on the means to her end with a woman's headlong self-abandonment to her own impulses, whispered to him, "Read it out from the beginning. I must and will hear it!" Her eyes flashed their burning light into his; her breath beat on his cheek. Before he could answer, before he could think, she was back with her husband. In an instant she had spoken, and in that instant her beauty had bent the Scotchman to her will. Frowning in reluctant acknowledgment of his own inability to resist her, he turned over the leaves of the letter; looked at the blank place where the pen had dropped from the writer's hand and had left a blot on the paper; turned back again to the beginning, and said the words, in the wife's interest, which the wife herself had put into his lips.

"Perhaps, sir, you may wish to make some corrections," he began, with all his attention apparently fixed on the letter, and with every outward appearance of letting his sour temper again get the better of him. "Shall I read over to you what you have already written?"

Mrs. Armadale, sitting at the bed head on one side, and the doctor, with his fingers on the patient's pulse, sitting on the other, waited with widely different anxieties for the answer to Mr. Neal's question. Mr. Armadale's eyes turned searchingly from his child to his wife.

"You will hear it?" he said. Her breath came and went quickly; her hand stole up and took his; she bowed her head in silence. Her husband paused, taking secret counsel with his thoughts, and keeping his eyes fixed on his wife. At last he decided, and gave the answer. "Read it," he said, "and stop when I tell you."

It was close on one o'clock, and the bell was ringing which summoned the visitors to their early dinner at the inn. The quick beat of footsteps, and the gathering hum of voices outside, penetrated gayly into the room, as Mr. Neal spread the manuscript before him on the table, and read the opening sentences in these words:

"I address this letter to my son, when my son is of an age to understand it. Having lost all hope of living to see my boy grow up to manhood, I have no

choice but to write here what I would fain have said to him at a future time with my own lips.

"I have three objects in writing. First, to reveal the circumstances which attended the marriage of an English lady of my acquaintance, in the island of Madeira. Secondly, to throw the true light on the death of her husband a short time afterward, on board the French timber ship La Grace de Dieu. Thirdly, to warn my son of a danger that lies in wait for him--a danger that will rise from his father's grave when the earth has closed over his father's ashes.

"The story of the English lady's marriage begins with my inheriting the great Armadale property, and my taking the fatal Armadale name.

"I am the only surviving son of the late Mathew Wrentmore, of Barbadoes. I was born on our family estate in that island, and I lost my father when I was still a child. My mother was blindly fond of me; she denied me nothing, she let me live as I pleased. My boyhood and youth were passed in idleness and self-indulgence, among people--slaves and half-castes mostly--to whom my will was law. I doubt if there is a gentleman of my birth and station in all England as ignorant as I am at this moment. I doubt if there was ever a young man in this world whose passions were left so entirely without control of any kind as mine were in those early days.

"My mother had a woman's romantic objection to my father's homely Christian name. I was christened Allan, after the name of a wealthy cousin of my father's--the late Allan Armadale--who possessed estates in our neighborhood, the largest and most productive in the island, and who consented to be my godfather by proxy. Mr. Armadale had never seen his West Indian property. He lived in England; and, after sending me the customary godfather's present, he held no further communication with my parents for years afterward. I was just twenty-one before we heard again from Mr. Armadale. On that occasion my mother received a letter from him asking if I was still alive, and offering no less (if I was) than to make me the heir to his West Indian property.

"This piece of good fortune fell to me entirely through the misconduct of Mr. Armadale's son, an only child. The young man had disgraced himself beyond all redemption; had left his home an outlaw; and had been thereupon renounced by his father at once and forever. Having no other near male relative to succeed him, Mr. Armadale thought of his cousin's son and his own godson; and he offered the West Indian estate to me, and my heirs after me, on one condition--that I and my heirs should take his name. The

proposal was gratefully accepted, and the proper legal measures were adopted for changing my name in the colony and in the mother country. By the next mail information reached Mr. Armadale that his condition had been complied with. The return mail brought news from the lawyers. The will had been altered in my favor, and in a week afterward the death of my benefactor had made me the largest proprietor and the richest man in Barbadoes.

"This was the first event in the chain. The second event followed it six weeks afterward.

"At that time there happened to be a vacancy in the clerk's office on the estate, and there came to fill it a young man about my own age who had recently arrived in the island. He announced himself by the name of Fergus Ingleby. My impulses governed me in everything; I knew no law but the law of my own caprice, and I took a fancy to the stranger the moment I set eyes on him. He had the manners of a gentleman, and he possessed the most attractive social qualities which, in my small experience, I had ever met with. When I heard that the written references to character which he had brought with him were pronounced to be unsatisfactory, I interfered, and insisted that he should have the place. My will was law, and he had it.

"My mother disliked and distrusted Ingleby from the first. When she found the intimacy between us rapidly ripening; when she found me admitting this inferior to the closest companionship and confidence (I had lived with my inferiors all my life, and I liked it), she made effort after effort to part us, and failed in one and all. Driven to her last resources, she resolved to try the one chance left--the chance of persuading me to take a voyage which I had often thought of--a voyage to England.

"Before she spoke to me on the subject, she resolved to interest me in the idea of seeing England, as I had never been interested yet. She wrote to an old friend and an old admirer of hers, the late Stephen Blanchard, of Thorpe Ambrose, in Norfolk--a gentleman of landed estate, and a widower with a grown-up family. After-discoveries informed me that she must have alluded to their former attachment (which was checked, I believe, by the parents on either side); and that, in asking Mr. Blanchard's welcome for her son when he came to England, she made inquiries about his daughter, which hinted at the chance of a marriage uniting the two families, if the young lady and I met and liked one another. We were equally matched in every respect, and my mother's recollection of her girlish attachment to Mr. Blanchard made the prospect of my marrying her old admirer's daughter the brightest and happiest prospect that her eyes could see. Of all this I knew nothing until

Mr. Blanchard's answer arrived at Barbadoes. Then my mother showed me the letter, and put the temptation which was to separate me from Fergus Ingleby openly in my way.

"Mr. Blanchard's letter was dated from the Island of Madeira. He was out of health, and he had been ordered there by the doctors to try the climate. His daughter was with him. After heartily reciprocating all my mother's hopes and wishes, he proposed (if I intended leaving Barbadoes shortly) that I should take Madeira on my way to England, and pay him a visit at his temporary residence in the island. If this could not be, he mentioned the time at which he expected to be back in England, when I might be sure of finding a welcome at his own house of Thorpe Ambrose. In conclusion, he apologized for not writing at greater length; explaining that his sight was affected, and that he had disobeyed the doctor's orders by yielding to the temptation of writing to his old friend with his own hand.

"Kindly as it was expressed, the letter itself might have had little influence on me. But there was something else besides the letter; there was inclosed in it a miniature portrait of Miss Blanchard. At the back of the portrait, her father had written, half-jestingly, half-tenderly, 'I can't ask my daughter to spare my eyes as usual, without telling her of your inquiries, and putting a young lady's diffidence to the blush. So I send her in effigy (without her knowledge) to answer for herself. It is a good likeness of a good girl. If she likes your son--and if I like him, which I am sure I shall--we may yet live, my good friend, to see our children what we might once have been ourselves--man and wife.' My mother gave me the miniature with the letter. The portrait at once struck me--I can't say why, I can't say how--as nothing of the kind had ever struck me before.

"Harder intellects than mine might have attributed the extraordinary impression produced on me to the disordered condition of my mind at that time; to the weariness of my own base pleasures which had been gaining on me for months past, to the undefined longing which that weariness implied for newer interests and fresher hopes than any that had possessed me yet. I attempted no such sober self-examination as this: I believed in destiny then, I believe in destiny now. It was enough for me to know--as I did know--that the first sense I had ever felt of something better in my nature than my animal self was roused by that girl's face looking at me from her picture as no woman's face had ever looked at me yet. In those tender eyes--in the chance of making that gentle creature my wife--I saw my destiny written. The portrait which had come into my hands so strangely and so unexpectedly was the silent messenger of happiness close at hand, sent to warn, to encourage, to rouse me before it was too late. I put the miniature

under my pillow at night; I looked at it again the next morning. My conviction of the day before remained as strong as ever; my superstition (if you please to call it so) pointed out to me irresistibly the way on which I should go. There was a ship in port which was to sail for England in a fortnight, touching at Madeira. In that ship I took my passage."

Thus far the reader had advanced with no interruption to disturb him. But at the last words the tones of another voice, low and broken, mingled with his own.

"Was she a fair woman," asked the voice, "or dark, like me?"

Mr. Neal paused, and looked up. The doctor was still at the bed head, with his fingers mechanically on the patient's pulse. The child, missing his midday sleep, was beginning to play languidly with his new toy. The father's eyes were watching him with a rapt and ceaseless attention. But one great change was visible in the listeners since the narrative had begun. Mrs. Armadale had dropped her hold of her husband's hand, and sat with her face steadily turned away from him The hot African blood burned red in her dusky cheeks as she obstinately repeated the question: "Was she a fair woman, or dark, like me?"

"Fair," said her husband, without looking at her.

Her hands, lying clasped together in her lap, wrung each other hard--she said no more. Mr. Neal's overhanging eyebrows lowered ominously as he returned to the narrative. He had incurred his own severe displeasure--he had caught himself in the act of secretly pitying her.

"I have said"--the letter proceeded--"that Ingleby was admitted to my closest confidence. I was sorry to leave him; and I was distressed by his evident surprise and mortification when he heard that I was going away. In my own justification, I showed him the letter and the likeness, and told him the truth. His interest in the portrait seemed to be hardly inferior to my own. He asked me about Miss Blanchard's family and Miss Blanchard's fortune with the sympathy of a true friend; and he strengthened my regard for him, and my belief in him, by putting himself out of the question, and by generously encouraging me to persist in my new purpose. When we parted, I was in high health and spirits. Before we met again the next day, I was suddenly struck by an illness which threatened both my reason and my life.

"I have no proof against Ingleby. There was more than one woman on the island whom I had wronged beyond all forgiveness, and whose vengeance

might well have reached me at that time. I can accuse nobody. I can only say that my life was saved by my old black nurse; and that the woman afterward acknowledged having used the known negro antidote to a known negro poison in those parts. When my first days of convalescence came, the ship in which my passage had been taken had long since sailed. When I asked for Ingleby, he was gone. Proofs of his unpardonable misconduct in his situation were placed before me, which not even my partiality for him could resist. He had been turned out of the office in the first days of my illness, and nothing more was known of him but that he had left the island.

"All through my sufferings the portrait had been under my pillow. All through my convalescence it was my one consolation when I remembered the past, and my one encouragement when I thought of the future. No words can describe the hold that first fancy had now taken of me--with time and solitude and suffering to help it. My mother, with all her interest in the match, was startled by the unexpected success of her own project. She had written to tell Mr. Blanchard of my illness, but had received no reply. She now offered to write again, if I would promise not to leave her before my recovery was complete. My impatience acknowledged no restraint. Another ship in port gave me another chance of leaving for Madeira. Another examination of Mr. Blanchard's letter of invitation assured me that I should find him still in the island, if I seized my opportunity on the spot. In defiance of my mother's entreaties, I insisted on taking my passage in the second ship--and this time, when the ship sailed, I was on board.

"The change did me good; the sea-air made a man of me again. After an unusually rapid voyage, I found myself at the end of my pilgrimage. On a fine, still evening which I can never forget, I stood alone on the shore, with her likeness in my bosom, and saw the white walls of the house where I knew that she lived.

"I strolled round the outer limits of the grounds to compose myself before I went in. Venturing through a gate and a shrubbery, I looked into the garden, and saw a lady there, loitering alone on the lawn. She turned her face toward me--and I beheld the original of my portrait, the fulfillment of my dream! It is useless, and worse than useless, to write of it now. Let me only say that every promise which the likeness had made to my fancy the living woman kept to my eyes in the moment when they first looked on her. Let me say this--and no more.

"I was too violently agitated to trust myself in her presence. I drew back undiscovered, and, making my way to the front door of the house, asked for her father first. Mr. Blanchard had retired to his room, and could see

nobody. Upon that I took courage, and asked for Miss Blanchard. The servant smiled. 'My young lady is not Miss Blanchard any longer, sir,' he said. 'She is married.' Those words would have struck some men, in my position, to the earth. They fired my hot blood, and I seized the servant by the throat, in a frenzy of rage 'It's a lie!' I broke out, speaking to him as if he had been one of the slaves on my own estate. 'It's the truth,' said the man, struggling with me; 'her husband is in the house at this moment.' 'Who is he, you scoundrel?'The servant answered by repeating my own name, to my own face: 'Allan Armadale.'

"You can now guess the truth. Fergus Ingleby was the outlawed son whose name and whose inheritance I had taken. And Fergus Ingleby was even with me for depriving him of his birthright.

"Some account of the manner in which the deception had been carried out is necessary to explain--I don't say to justify--the share I took in the events that followed my arrival at Madeira.

"By Ingleby's own confession, he had come to Barbadoes--knowing of his father's death and of my succession to the estates--with the settled purpose of plundering and injuring me. My rash confidence put such an opportunity into his hands as he could never have hoped for. He had waited to possess himself of the letter which my mother wrote to Mr. Blanchard at the outset of my illness--had then caused his own dismissal from his situation--and had sailed for Madeira in the very ship that was to have sailed with me. Arrived at the island, he had waited again till the vessel was away once more on her voyage, and had then presented himself at Mr. Blanchard's--not in the assumed name by which I shall continue to speak of him here, but in the name which was as certainly his as mine, 'Allan Armadale.' The fraud at the outset presented few difficulties. He had only an ailing old man (who had not seen my mother for half a lifetime) and an innocent, unsuspicious girl (who had never seen her at all) to deal with; and he had learned enough in my service to answer the few questions that were put to him as readily as I might have answered them myself. His looks and manners, his winning ways with women, his quickness and cunning, did the rest. While I was still on my sickbed, he had won Miss Blanchard's affections. While I was dreaming over the likeness in the first days of my convalescence, he had secured Mr. Blanchard's consent to the celebration of the marriage before he and his daughter left the island.

"Thus far Mr. Blanchard's infirmity of sight had helped the deception. He had been content to send messages to my mother, and to receive the messages which were duly invented in return. But when the suitor was

accepted, and the wedding-day was appointed, he felt it due to his old friend to write to her, asking her formal consent and inviting her to the marriage. He could only complete part of the letter himself; the rest was finished, under his dictation, by Miss Blanchard. There was no chance of being beforehand with the post-office this time; and Ingleby, sure of his place in the heart of his victim, waylaid her as she came out of her father's room with the letter, and privately told her the truth. She was still under age, and the position was a serious one. If the letter was posted, no resource would be left but to wait and be parted forever, or to elope under circumstances which made detection almost a certainty. The destination of any ship which took them away would be known beforehand; and the fast-sailing yacht in which Mr. Blanchard had come to Madeira was waiting in the harbor to take him back to England. The only other alternative was to continue the deception by suppressing the letter, and to confess the truth when they were securely married. What arts of persuasion Ingleby used--what base advantage he might previously have taken of her love and her trust in him to degrade Miss Blanchard to his own level--I cannot say. He did degrade her. The letter never went to its destination; and, with the daughter's privity and consent, the father's confidence was abused to the very last.

"The one precaution now left to take was to fabricate the answer from my mother which Mr. Blanchard expected, and which would arrive in due course of post before the day appointed for the marriage. Ingleby had my mother's stolen letter with him; but he was without the imitative dexterity which would have enabled him to make use of it for a forgery of her handwriting. Miss Blanchard, who had consented passively to the deception, refused to take any active share in the fraud practiced on her father. In this difficulty, Ingleby found an instrument ready to his hand in an orphan girl of barely twelve years old, a marvel of precocious ability, whom Miss Blanchard had taken a romantic fancy to befriend and whom she had brought away with her from England to be trained as her maid. That girl's wicked dexterity removed the one serious obstacle left to the success of the fraud. I saw the imitation of my mother's writing which she had produced under Ingleby's instructions and (if the shameful truth must be told) with her young mistress's knowledge--and I believe I should have been deceived by it myself. I saw the girl afterward--and my blood curdled at the sight of her. If she is alive now, woe to the people who trust her! No creature more innately deceitful and more innately pitiless ever walked this earth.

"The forged letter paved the way securely for the marriage; and when I reached the house, they were (as the servant had truly told me) man and wife. My arrival on the scene simply precipitated the confession which they had both agreed to make. Ingleby's own lips shamelessly acknowledged the

truth. He had nothing to lose by speaking out--he was married, and his wife's fortune was beyond her father's control. I pass over all that followed--my interview with the daughter, and my interview with the father--to come to results. For two days the efforts of the wife, and the efforts of the clergyman who had celebrated the marriage, were successful in keeping Ingleby and myself apart. On the third day I set my trap more successfully, and I and the man who had mortally injured me met together alone, face to face.

"Remember how my confidence had been abused; remember how the one good purpose of my life had been thwarted; remember the violent passions rooted deep in my nature, and never yet controlled--and then imagine for yourself what passed between us. All I need tell here is the end. He was a taller and a stronger man than I, and he took his brute's advantage with a brute's ferocity. He struck me.

"Think of the injuries I had received at that man's hands, and then think of his setting his mark on my face by a blow!

"I went to an English officer who had been my fellow-passenger on the voyage from Barbadoes. I told him the truth, and he agreed with me that a meeting was inevitable. Dueling had its received formalities and its established laws in those days; and he began to speak of them. I stopped him. 'I will take a pistol in my right hand,' I said, 'and he shall take a pistol in his: I will take one end of a handkerchief in my left hand, and he shall take the other end in his; and across that handkerchief the duel shall be fought.' The officer got up, and looked at me as if I had personally insulted him. 'You are asking me to be present at a murder and a suicide,' he said; 'I decline to serve you.' He left the room. As soon as he was gone I wrote down the words I had said to the officer and sent them by a messenger to Ingleby. While I was waiting for an answer, I sat down before the glass, and looked at his mark on my face. 'Many a man has had blood on his hands and blood on his conscience,' I thought, 'for less than this.'

"The messenger came back with Ingleby's answer. It appointed a meeting for three o'clock the next day, at a lonely place in the interior of the island. I had resolved what to do if he refused; his letter released me from the horror of my own resolution. I felt grateful to him--yes, absolutely grateful to him--for writing it.

"The next day I went to the place. He was not there. I waited two hours, and he never came. At last the truth dawned on me. 'Once a coward, always a coward,' I thought. I went back to Mr. Blanchard's house. Before I got there,

a sudden misgiving seized me, and I turned aside to the harbor. I was right; the harbor was the place to go to. A ship sailing for Lisbon that afternoon had offered him the opportunity of taking a passage for himself and his wife, and escaping me. His answer to my challenge had served its purpose of sending me out of the way into the interior of the island. Once more I had trusted in Fergus Ingleby, and once more those sharp wits of his had been too much for me.

"I asked my informant if Mr. Blanchard was aware as yet of his daughter's departure. He had discovered it, but not until the ship had sailed. This time I took a lesson in cunning from Ingleby. Instead of showing myself at Mr. Blanchard's house, I went first and looked at Mr. Blanchard's yacht.

"The vessel told me what the vessel's master might have concealed--the truth. I found her in the confusion of a sudden preparation for sea. All the crew were on board, with the exception of some few who had been allowed their leave on shore, and who were away in the interior of the island, nobody knew where. When I discovered that the sailing-master was trying in, to supply their places with the best men he could pick up at a moment's notice, my resolution was instantly taken. I knew the duties on board a yacht well enough, having had a vessel of my own, and having sailed her myself. Hurrying into the town, I changed my dress for a sailor's coat and hat, and, returning to the harbor, I offered myself as one of the volunteer crew. I don't know what the sailing-master saw in my face. My answers to his questions satisfied him, and yet he looked at me and hesitated. But hands were scarce, and it ended in my being taken on board. An hour later Mr. Blanchard joined us, and was assisted into the cabin, suffering pitiably in mind and body both. An hour after that we were at sea, with a starless night overhead, and a fresh breeze behind us.

"As I had surmised, we were in pursuit of the vessel in which Ingleby and his wife had left the island that afternoon. The ship was French, and was employed in the timber trade: her name was La Grace de Dieu. Nothing more was known of her than that she was bound for Lisbon; that she had been driven out of her course; and that she had touched at Madeira, short of men and short of provisions. The last want had been supplied, but not the first. Sailors distrusted the sea-worthiness of the ship, and disliked the look of the vagabond crew. When those two serious facts had been communicated to Mr. Blanchard, the hard words he had spoken to his child in the first shock of discovering that she had helped to deceive him smote him to the heart. He instantly determined to give his daughter a refuge on board his own vessel, and to quiet her by keeping her villain of a husband out of the way of all harm at my hands. The yacht sailed three feet and more

to the ship's one. There was no doubt of our overtaking La Grace de Dieu; the only fear was that we might pass her in the darkness.

"After we had been some little time out, the wind suddenly dropped, and there fell on us an airless, sultry calm. When the order came to get the topmasts on deck, and to shift the large sails, we all knew what to expect. In little better than an hour more, the storm was upon us, the thunder was pealing over our heads, and the yacht was running for it. She was a powerful schooner-rigged vessel of three hundred tons, as strong as wood and iron could make her; she was handled by a sailing-master who thoroughly understood his work, and she behaved nobly. As the new morning came, the fury of the wind, blowing still from the southwest quarter, subsided a little, and the sea was less heavy. Just before daybreak we heard faintly, through the howling of the gale, the report of a gun. The men collected anxiously on deck, looked at each other, and said: 'There she is!'

"With the daybreak we saw the vessel, and the timber-ship it was. She lay wallowing in the trough of the sea, her foremast and her mainmast both gone--a water-logged wreck. The yacht carried three boats; one amidships, and two slung to davits on the quarters; and the sailing-master, seeing signs of the storm renewing its fury before long, determined on lowering the quarter-boats while the lull lasted. Few as the people were on board the wreck, they were too many for one boat, and the risk of trying two boats at once was thought less, in the critical state of the weather, than the risk of making two separate trips from the yacht to the ship. There might be time to make one trip in safety, but no man could look at the heavens and say there would be time enough for two.

"The boats were manned by volunteers from the crew, I being in the second of the two. When the first boat was got alongside of the timber-ship--a service of difficulty and danger which no words can describe--all the men on board made a rash to leave the wreck together. If the boat had not been pulled off again before the whole of them had crowded in, the lives of all must have been sacrificed. As our boat approached the vessel in its turn, we arranged that four of us should get on board--two (I being one of them) to see to the safety of Mr. Blanchard's daughter, and two to beat back the cowardly remnant of the crew if they tried to crowd in first. The other three--the coxswain and two oarsmen--were left in the boat to keep her from being crushed by the ship. What the others saw when they first boarded La Grace de Dieu I don't know; what I saw was the woman whom I had lost, the woman vilely stolen from me, lying in a swoon on the deck. We lowered her, insensible, into the boat. The remnant of the crew--five in number--were

compelled by main force to follow her in an orderly manner, one by one, and minute by minute, as the chance offered for safely taking them in. I was the last who left; and, at the next roll of the ship toward us, the empty length of the deck, without a living creature on it from stem to stern, told the boat's crew that their work was done. With the louder and louder howling of the fast-rising tempest to warn them, they rowed for their lives back to the yacht.

"A succession of heavy squalls had brought round the course of the new storm that was coming, from the south to the north; and the sailing-master, watching his opportunity, had wore the yacht to be ready for it. Before the last of our men had got on board again, it burst on us with the fury of a hurricane. Our boat was swamped, but not a life was lost. Once more we ran before it, due south, at the mercy of the wind. I was on deck with the rest, watching the one rag of sail we could venture to set, and waiting to supply its place with another, if it blew out of the bolt-ropes, when the mate came close to me, and shouted in my ear through the thunder of the storm: 'She has come to her senses in the cabin, and has asked for her husband. Where is he?' Not a man on board knew. The yacht was searched from one end to another without finding him. The men were mustered in defiance of the weather--he was not among them. The crews of the two boats were questioned. All the first crew could say was that they had pulled away from the wreck when the rush into their boat took place, and that they knew nothing of whom they let in or whom they kept out. All the second crew could say was that they had brought back to the yacht every living soul left by the first boat on the deck of the timber-ship. There was no blaming anybody; but, at the same time, there was no resisting the fact that the man was missing.

"All through that day the storm, raging unabatedly, never gave us even the shadow of a chance of returning and searching the wreck. The one hope for the yacht was to scud. Toward evening the gale, after having carried us to the southward of Madeira, began at last to break--the wind shifted again--and allowed us to bear up for the island. Early the next morning we got back into port. Mr. Blanchard and his daughter were taken ashore, the sailing-master accompanying them, and warning us that he should have something to say on his return which would nearly concern the whole crew.

"We were mustered on deck, and addressed by the sailing-master as soon as he came on board again. He had Mr. Blanchard's orders to go back at once to the timber-ship and to search for the missing man. We were bound to do this for his sake, and for the sake of his wife, whose reason was despaired of by the doctors if something was not done to quiet her. We might be almost

sure of finding the vessel still afloat, for her ladling of timber would keep her above water as long as her hull held together. If the man was on board--living or dead--he must be found and brought back. And if the weather continued to be moderate, there was no reason why the men, with proper assistance, should not bring the ship back, too, and (their master being quite willing) earn their share of the salvage with the officers of the yacht.

"Upon this the crew gave three cheers, and set to work forthwith to get the schooner to sea again. I was the only one of them who drew back from the enterprise. I told them the storm had upset me--I was ill, and wanted rest. They all looked me in the face as I passed through them on my way out of the yacht, but not a man of them spoke to me.

"I waited through that day at a tavern on the port for the first news from the wreck. It was brought toward night-fall by one of the pilot-boats which had taken part in the enterprise--a successful enterprise, as the event proved--for saving the abandoned ship. La Grace de Dieu had been discovered still floating, and the body of Ingleby had been found on board, drowned in the cabin. At dawn the next morning the dead man was brought back by the yacht; and on the same day the funeral took place in the Protestant cemetery."

"Stop!" said the voice from the bed, before the reader could turn to a new leaf and begin the next paragraph.

There was a change in the room, and there were changes in the audience, since Mr. Neal had last looked up from the narrative. A ray of sunshine was crossing the death-bed; and the child, overcome by drowsiness, lay peacefully asleep in the golden light. The father's countenance had altered visibly. Forced into action by the tortured mind, the muscles of the lower face, which had never moved yet, were moving distortedly now. Warned by the damps gathering heavily on his forehead, the doctor had risen to revive the sinking man. On the other side of the bed the wife's chair stood empty. At the moment when her husband had interrupted the reading, she had drawn back behind the bed head, out of his sight. Supporting herself against the wall, she stood there in hiding, her eyes fastened in hungering suspense on the manuscript in Mr. Neal's hand.

In a minute more the silence was broken again by Mr. Armadale.

"Where is she?" he asked, looking angrily at his wife's empty chair. The doctor pointed to the place. She had no choice but to come forward. She came slowly and stood before him.

"You promised to go when I told you," he said. "Go now."

Mr. Neal tried hard to control his hand as it kept his place between the leaves of the manuscripts but it trembled in spite of him. A suspicion which had been slowly forcing itself on his mind, while he was reading, became a certainty when he heard those words. From one revelation to another the letter had gone on, until it had now reached the brink of a last disclosure to come. At that brink the dying man had predetermined to silence the reader's voice, before he had permitted his wife to hear the narrative read. There was the secret which the son was to know in after years, and which the mother was never to approach. From that resolution, his wife's tenderest pleadings had never moved him an inch--and now, from his own lips, his wife knew it.

She made him no answer. She stood there and looked at him; looked her last entreaty--perhaps her last farewell. His eyes gave her back no answering glance: they wandered from her mercilessly to the sleeping boy. She turned speechless from the bed. Without a look at the child--without a word to the two strangers breathlessly watching her--she kept the promise she had given, and in dead silence left the room.

There was something in the manner of her departure which shook the self-possession of both the men who witnessed it. When the door closed on her, they recoiled instinctively from advancing further in the dark. The doctor's reluctance was the first to express itself. He attempted to obtain the patient's permission to withdraw until the letter was completed. The patient refused.

Mr. Neal spoke next at greater length and to more serious purpose.

"The doctor is accustomed in his profession," he began, "and I am accustomed in mine, to have the secrets of others placed in our keeping. But it is my duty, before we go further, to ask if you really understand the extraordinary position which we now occupy toward one another. You have just excluded Mrs. Armadale, before our own eyes, from a place in your confidence. And you are now offering that same place to two men who are total strangers to you."

"Yes," said Mr. Armadale, "because you are strangers."

Few as the words were, the inference to be drawn from them was not of a nature to set distrust at rest. Mr. Neal put it plainly into words.

"You are in urgent need of my help and of the doctor's help," he said. "Am I to understand (so long as you secure our assistance) that the impression which the closing passages of this letter may produce on us is a matter of indifference to you?"

"Yes. I don't spare you. I don't spare myself. I do spare my wife."

"You force me to a conclusion, sir, which is a very serious one," said Mr. Neal. "If I am to finish this letter under your dictation, I must claim permission--having read aloud the greater part of it already--to read aloud what remains, in the hearing of this gentleman, as a witness."

"Read it."

Gravely doubting, the doctor resumed his chair. Gravely doubting, Mr. Neal turned the leaf, and read the next words:

"There is more to tell before I can leave the dead man to his rest. I have described the finding of his body. But I have not described the circumstances under which he met his death.

"He was known to have been on deck when the yacht's boats were seen approaching the wreck; and he was afterward missed in the confusion caused by the panic of the crew. At that time the water was five feet deep in the cabin, and was rising fast. There was little doubt of his having gone down into that water of his own accord. The discovery of his wife's jewel box, close under him, on the floor, explained his presence in the cabin. He was known to have seen help approaching, and it was quite likely that he had thereupon gone below to make an effort at saving the box. It was less probable--though it might still have been inferred--that his death was the result of some accident in diving, which had for the moment deprived him of his senses. But a discovery made by the yacht's crew pointed straight to a conclusion which struck the men, one and all, with the same horror. When the course of their search brought them to the cabin, they found the scuttle bolted, and the door locked on the outside. Had some one closed the cabin, not knowing he was there? Setting the panic-stricken condition of the crew out of the question, there was no motive for closing the cabin before leaving the wreck. But one other conclusion remained. Had some murderous hand purposely locked the man in, and left him to drown as the water rose over him?

"Yes. A murderous hand had locked him in, and left him to drown. That hand was mine."

The Scotchman started up from the table; the doctor shrank from the bedside. The two looked at the dying wretch, mastered by the same loathing, chilled by the same dread. He lay there, with his child's head on his breast; abandoned by the sympathies of man, accursed by the justice of God--he lay there, in the isolation of Cain, and looked back at them.

At the moment when the two men rose to their feet, the door leading into the next room was shaken heavily on the outer side, and a sound like the sound of a fall, striking dull on their ears, silenced them both. Standing nearest to the door, the doctor opened it, passed through, and closed it instantly. Mr. Neal turned his back on the bed, and waited the event in silence. The sound, which had failed to awaken the child, had failed also to attract the father's notice. His own words had taken him far from all that was passing at his deathbed. His helpless body was back on the wreck, and the ghost of his lifeless hand was turning the lock of the cabin door.

A bell rang in the next room--eager voices talked; hurried footsteps moved in it--an interval passed, and the doctor returned. "Was she listening?" whispered Mr. Neal, in German. "The women are restoring her," the doctor whispered back. "She has heard it all. In God's name, what are we to do next?" Before it was possible to reply, Mr. Armadale spoke. The doctor's return had roused him to a sense of present things.

"Go on," he said, as if nothing had happened.

"I refuse to meddle further with your infamous secret," returned Mr. Neal. "You are a murderer on your own confession. If that letter is to be finished, don't ask me to hold the pen for you."

"You gave me your promise," was the reply, spoken with the same immovable self-possession. "You must write for me, or break your word."

For the moment, Mr. Neal was silenced. There the man lay--sheltered from the execration of his fellow-creatures, under the shadow of Death--beyond the reach of all human condemnation, beyond the dread of all mortal laws; sensitive to nothing but his one last resolution to finish the letter addressed to his son.

Mr. Neal drew the doctor aside. "A word with you," he said, in German. "Do you persist in asserting that he may be speechless before we can send to Stuttgart?"

"Look at his lips," said the doctor, "and judge for yourself."

His lips answered for him: the reading of the narrative had left its mark on them already. A distortion at the corners of his mouth, which had been barely noticeable when Mr. Neal entered the room, was plainly visible now. His slow articulation labored more and more painfully with every word he uttered. The position was emphatically a terrible one. After a moment more of hesitation, Mr. Neal made a last attempt to withdraw from it.

"Now my eyes are open," he said, sternly, "do you dare hold me to an engagement which you forced on me blindfold?"

"No," answered Mr. Armadale. "I leave you to break your word."

The look which accompanied that reply stung the Scotchman's pride to the quick. When he spoke next, he spoke seated in his former place at the table.

"No man ever yet said of me that I broke my word," he retorted, angrily; "and not even you shall say it of me now. Mind this! If you hold me to my promise, I hold you to my condition. I have reserved my freedom of action, and I warn you I will use it at my own sole discretion, as soon as I am released from the sight of you."

"Remember he is dying," pleaded the doctor, gently.

"Take your place, sir," said Mr. Neal, pointing to the empty chair. "What remains to be read, I will only read in your hearing. What remains to be written, I will only write in your presence. You brought me here. I have a right to insist--and I do insist--on your remaining as a witness to the last."

The doctor accepted his position without remonstrance. Mr. Neal returned to the manuscript, and read what remained of it uninterruptedly to the end:

"Without a word in my own defense, I have acknowledged my guilt. Without a word in my own defense, I will reveal how the crime was committed.

"No thought of him was in my mind, when I saw his wife insensible on the deck of the timber-ship. I did my part in lowering her safely into the boat. Then, and not till then, I felt the thought of him coming back. In the confusion that prevailed while the men of the yacht were forcing the men of the ship to wait their time, I had an opportunity of searching for him unobserved. I stepped back from the bulwark, not knowing whether he was away in the first boat, or whether he was still on board--I stepped back, and

saw him mount the cabin stairs empty-handed, with the water dripping from him. After looking eagerly toward the boat (without noticing me), he saw there was time to spare before the crew were taken. 'Once more!' he said to himself--and disappeared again, to make a last effort at recovering the jewel box. The devil at my elbow whispered, 'Don't shoot him like a man: drown him like a dog!' He was under water when I bolted the scuttle. But his head rose to the surface before I could close the cabin door. I looked at him, and he looked at me--and I locked the door in his face. The next minute, I was back among the last men left on deck. The minute after, it was too late to repent. The storm was threatening us with destruction, and the boat's crew were pulling for their lives from the ship.

"My son! I have pursued you from my grave with a confession which my love might have spared you. Read on, and you will know why.

"I will say nothing of my sufferings; I will plead for no mercy to my memory. There is a strange sinking at my heart, a strange trembling in my hand, while I write these lines, which warns me to hasten to the end. I left the island without daring to look for the last time at the woman whom I had lost so miserably, whom I had injured so vilely. When I left, the whole weight of the suspicion roused by the manner of Ingleby's death rested on the crew of the French vessel. No motive for the supposed murder could be brought home to any of them; but they were known to be, for the most part, outlawed ruffians capable of any crime, and they were suspected and examined accordingly. It was not till afterward that I heard by accident of the suspicion shifting round at last to me. The widow alone recognized the vague description given of the strange man who had made one of the yacht's crew, and who had disappeared the day afterward. The widow alone knew, from that time forth, why her husband had been murdered, and who had done the deed. When she made that discovery, a false report of my death had been previously circulated in the island. Perhaps I was indebted to the report for my immunity from all legal proceedings; perhaps (no eye but Ingleby's having seen me lock the cabin door) there was not evidence enough to justify an inquiry; perhaps the widow shrank from the disclosures which must have followed a public charge against me, based on her own bare suspicion of the truth. However it might be, the crime which I had committed unseen has remained a crime unpunished from that time to this.

"I left Madeira for the West Indies in disguise. The first news that met me when the ship touched at Barbadoes was the news of my mother's death. I had no heart to return to the old scenes. The prospect of living at home in solitude, with the torment of my own guilty remembrances gnawing at me day and night, was more than I had the courage to confront. Without

landing, or discovering myself to any one on shore, I went on as far as the ship would take me--to the island of Trinidad.

"At that place I first saw your mother. It was my duty to tell her the truth--and I treacherously kept my secret. It was my duty to spare her the hopeless sacrifice of her freedom and her happiness to such an existence as mine--and I did her the injury of marrying her. If she is alive when you read this, grant her the mercy of still concealing the truth. The one atonement I can make to her is to keep her unsuspicious to the last of the man she has married. Pity her, as I have pitied her. Let this letter be a sacred confidence between father and son.

"The time when you were born was the time when my health began to give way. Some months afterward, in the first days of my recovery, you were brought to me; and I was told that you had been christened during my illness. Your mother had done as other loving mothers do--she had christened her first-born by his father's name. You, too, were Allan Armadale. Even in that early time--even while I was happily ignorant of what I have discovered since--my mind misgave me when I looked at you, and thought of that fatal name.

"As soon as I could be moved, my presence was required at my estates in Barbadoes. It crossed my mind--wild as the idea may appear to you--to renounce the condition which compelled my son as well as myself to take the Armadale name, or lose the succession to the Armadale property. But, even in those days, the rumor of a contemplated emancipation of the slaves--the emancipation which is now close at hand--was spreading widely in the colony. No man could tell how the value of West Indian property might be affected if that threatened change ever took place. No man could tell--if I gave you back my own paternal name, and left you without other provision in the future than my own paternal estate--how you might one day miss the broad Armadale acres, or to what future penury I might be blindly condemning your mother and yourself. Mark how the fatalities gathered one on the other! Mark how your Christian name came to you, how your surname held to you, in spite of me!

"My health had improved in my old home--but it was for a time only. I sank again, and the doctors ordered me to Europe. Avoiding England (why, you may guess), I took my passage, with you and your mother, for France. From France we passed into Italy. We lived here; we lived there. It was useless. Death had got met and Death followed me, go where I might. I bore it, for I had an alleviation to turn to which I had not deserved. You may shrink in horror from the very memory of me now. In those days, you comforted me.

The only warmth I still felt at my heart was the warmth you brought to it. My last glimpses of happiness in this world were the glimpses given me by my infant son.

"We removed from Italy, and went next to Lausanne--the place from which I am now writing to you. The post of this morning has brought me news, later and fuller than any I had received thus far, of the widow of the murdered man. The letter lies before me while I write. It comes from a friend of my early days, who has seen her, and spoken to her--who has been the first to inform her that the report of my death in Madeira was false. He writes, at a loss to account for the violent agitation which she showed on hearing that I was still alive, that I was married, and that I had an infant son. He asks me if I can explain it. He speaks in terms of sympathy for her--a young and beautiful woman, buried in the retirement of a fishing-village on the Devonshire coast; her father dead; her family estranged from her, in merciless disapproval of her marriage. He writes words which might have cut me to the heart, but for a closing passage in his letter, which seized my whole attention the instant I came to it, and which has forced from me the narrative that these pages contain.

"I now know what never even entered my mind as a suspicion till the letter reached me. I now know that the widow of the man whose death lies at my door has borne a posthumous child. That child is a boy--a year older than my own son. Secure in her belief in my death, his mother has done what my son's mother did: she has christened her child by his father's name. Again, in the second generation, there are two Allan Armadales as there were in the first. After working its deadly mischief with the fathers, the fatal resemblance of names has descended to work its deadly mischief with the sons.

"Guiltless minds may see nothing thus far but the result of a series of events which could lead no other way. I--with that man's life to answer for--I, going down into my grave, with my crime unpunished and unatoned, see what no guiltless minds can discern. I see danger in the future, begotten of the danger in the past--treachery that is the offspring of his treachery, and crime that is the child of my crime. Is the dread that now shakes me to the soul a phantom raised by the superstition of a dying man? I look into the Book which all Christendom venerates, and the Book tells me that the sin of the father shall be visited on the child. I look out into the world, and I see the living witnesses round me to that terrible truth. I see the vices which have contaminated the father descending, and contaminating the child; I see the shame which has disgraced the father's name descending, and disgracing the child's. I look in on myself, and I see my crime ripening again

for the future in the self-same circumstance which first sowed the seeds of it in the past, and descending, in inherited contamination of evil, from me to my son."

At those lines the writing ended. There the stroke had struck him, and the pen had dropped from his hand.

He knew the place; he remembered the words. At the instant when the reader's voice stopped, he looked eagerly at the doctor. "I have got what comes next in my mind," he said, with slower and slower articulation. "Help me to speak it."

The doctor administered a stimulant, and signed to Mr. Neal to give him time. After a little delay, the flame of the sinking spirit leaped up in his eyes once more. Resolutely struggling with his failing speech, he summoned the Scotchman to take the pen, and pronounced the closing sentences of the narrative, as his memory gave them back to him, one by one, in these words:

"Despise my dying conviction if you will, but grant me, I solemnly implore you, one last request. My son! the only hope I have left for you hangs on a great doubt--the doubt whether we are, or are not, the masters of our own destinies. It may be that mortal free-will can conquer mortal fate; and that going, as we all do, inevitably to death, we go inevitably to nothing that is before death. If this be so, indeed, respect--though you respect nothing else--the warning which I give you from my grave. Never, to your dying day, let any living soul approach you who is associated, directly or indirectly, with the crime which your father has committed. Avoid the widow of the man I killed--if the widow still lives. Avoid the maid whose wicked hand smoothed the way to the marriage--if the maid is still in her service. And more than all, avoid the man who bears the same name as your own. Offend your best benefactor, if that benefactor's influence has connected you one with the other. Desert the woman who loves you, if that woman is a link between you and him. Hide yourself from him under an assumed name. Put the mountains and the seas between you; be ungrateful, be unforgiving; be all that is most repellent to your own gentler nature, rather than live under the same roof, and breathe the same air, with that man. Never let the two Allan Armadales meet in this world: never, never, never!

"There lies the way by which you may escape--if any way there be. Take it, if you prize your own innocence and your own happiness, through all your life to come!

"I have done. If I could have trusted any weaker influence than the influence of this confession to incline you to my will, I would have spared you the disclosure which these pages contain. You are lying on my breast, sleeping the innocent sleep of a child, while a stranger's hand writes these words for you as they fall from my lips. Think what the strength of my conviction must be, when I can find the courage, on my death-bed, to darken all your young life at its outset with the shadow of your father's crime. Think, and be warned. Think, and forgive me if you can."

There it ended. Those were the father's last words to the son.

Inexorably faithful to his forced duty, Mr. Neal laid aside the pen, and read over aloud the lines he had just written. "Is there more to add?" he asked, with his pitilessly steady voice. There was no more to add.

Mr. Neal folded the manuscript, inclosed it in a sheet of paper, and sealed it with Mr. Armadale's own seal. "The address?" he said, with his merciless business formality. "To Allan Armadale, junior," he wrote, as the words were dictated from the bed. "Care of Godfrey Hammick, Esq., Offices of Messrs. Hammick and Ridge, Lincoln's Inn Fields, London." Having written the address, he waited, and considered for a moment. "Is your executor to open this?" he asked.

"No! he is to give it to my son when my son is of an age to understand it."

"In that case," pursued Mr. Neal, with all his wits in remorseless working order, "I will add a dated note to the address, repeating your own words as you have just spoken them, and explaining the circumstances under which my handwriting appears on the document." He wrote the note in the briefest and plainest terms, read it over aloud as he had read over what went before, signed his name and address at the end, and made the doctor sign next, as witness of the proceedings, and as medical evidence of the condition in which Mr. Armadale then lay. This done, he placed the letter in a second inclosure, sealed it as before, and directed it to Mr. Hammick, with the superscription of "private" added to the address. "Do you insist on my posting this?" he asked, rising with the letter in his hand.

"Give him time to think," said the doctor. "For the child's sake, give him time to think! A minute may change him."

"I will give him five minutes," answered Mr. Neal, placing his watch on the table, implacable just to the very last.

They waited, both looking attentively at Mr. Armadale. The signs of change which had appeared in him already were multiplying fast. The movement which continued mental agitation had communicated to the muscles of his face was beginning, under the same dangerous influence, to spread downward. His once helpless hands lay still no longer; they struggled pitiably on the bedclothes. At sight of that warning token, the doctor turned with a gesture of alarm, and beckoned Mr. Neal to come nearer. "Put the question at once," he said; "if you let the five minutes pass, you may be too late."

Mr. Neal approached the bed. He, too, noticed the movement of the hands. "Is that a bad sign?" he asked.

The doctor bent his head gravely. "Put your question at once," he repeated, "or you may be too late."

Mr. Neal held the letter before the eyes of the dying man "Do you know what this is?"

"My letter."

"Do you insist on my posting it?"

He mastered his failing speech for the last time, and gave the answer: "Yes!"

Mr. Neal moved to the door, with the letter in his hand. The German followed him a few steps, opened his lips to plead for a longer delay, met the Scotchman's inexorable eye, and drew back again in silence. The door closed and parted them, without a word having passed on either side.

The doctor went back to the bed and whispered to the sinking man: "Let me call him back; there is time to stop him yet!" It was useless. No answer came; nothing showed that he heeded, or even heard. His eyes wandered from the child, rested for a moment on his own struggling hand, and looked up entreatingly in the compassionate face that bent over him. The doctor lifted the hand, paused, followed the father's longing eyes back to the child, and, interpreting his last wish, moved the hand gently toward the boy's head. The hand touched it, and trembled violently. In another instant the trembling seized on the arm, and spread over the whole upper part of the body. The face turned from pale to red, from red to purple, from purple to pale again. Then the toiling hands lay still, and the shifting color changed no more.

The window of the next room was open, when the doctor entered it from the death chamber, with the child in his arms. He looked out as he passed by, and saw Mr. Neal in the street below, slowly returning to the inn.

"Where is the letter?" he asked.

Three words sufficed for the Scotchman's answer.

"In the post."

THE END OF THE PROLOGUE.