

as I had assured her that no misconception of her conduct existed in your mind, she went away satisfied. Her governess's parting threat doesn't seem to have dwelt on her memory. I can tell you, Mr. Armadale, it dwells on mine! You know my opinion of Miss Gwilt; and you know what Miss Gwilt herself has done this very evening to justify that opinion even in your eyes. May I ask, after all that has passed, whether you think she is the sort of woman who can be trusted to confine herself to empty threats?"

The question was a formidable one to answer. Forced steadily back from the position which he had occupied at the outset of the interview, by the irresistible pressure of plain facts, Allan began for the first time to show symptoms of yielding on the subject of Miss Gwilt. "Is there no other way of protecting Miss Milroy but the way you have mentioned?" he asked, uneasily.

"Do you think the major would listen to you, sir, if you spoke to him?" asked Pedgift Senior, sarcastically. "I'm rather afraid he wouldn't honor me with his attention. Or perhaps you would prefer alarming Miss Neelie by telling her in plain words that we both think her in danger? Or, suppose you send me to Miss Gwilt, with instructions to inform her that she has done her pupil a cruel injustice? Women are so proverbially ready to listen to reason; and they are so universally disposed to alter their opinions of each other on application--especially when one woman thinks that another woman has destroyed her prospect of making a good marriage. Don't mind me, Mr. Armadale; I'm only a lawyer, and I can sit waterproof under another shower of Miss Gwilt's tears!"

"Damn it, Mr. Pedgift, tell me in plain words what you want to do!" cried Allan, losing his temper at last.

"In plain words, Mr. Armadale, I want to keep Miss Gwilt's proceedings privately under view, as long as she stops in this neighborhood. I answer for finding a person who will look after her delicately and discreetly. And I agree to discontinue even this harmless superintendence of her actions, if there isn't good reasons shown for continuing it, to your entire satisfaction, in a week's time. I make that moderate proposal, sir, in what I sincerely believe to be Miss Milroy's interest, and I wait your answer, Yes or No."

"Can't I have time to consider?" asked Allan, driven to the last helpless expedient of taking refuge in delay.

"Certainly, Mr. Armadale. But don't forget, while you are considering, that Miss Milroy is in the habit of walking out alone in your park, innocent of all

apprehension of danger, and that Miss Gwilt is perfectly free to take any advantage of that circumstance that Miss Gwilt pleases."

"Do as you like!" exclaimed Allan, in despair. "And, for God's sake, don't torment me any longer!"

Popular prejudice may deny it, but the profession of the law is a practically Christian profession in one respect at least. Of all the large collection of ready answers lying in wait for mankind on a lawyer's lips, none is kept in better working order than "the soft answer which turneth away wrath." Pedgift Senior rose with the alacrity of youth in his legs, and the wise moderation of age on his tongue. "Many thanks, sir," he said, "for the attention you have bestowed on me. I congratulate you on your decision, and I wish you good-evening." This time his indicative snuff-box was not in his hand when he opened the door, and he actually disappeared without coming back for a second postscript.

Allan's head sank on his breast when he was left alone. "If it was only the end of the week!" he thought, longingly. "If I only had Midwinter back again!"

As that aspiration escaped the client's lips, the lawyer got gayly into his gig. "Hie away, old girl!" cried Pedgift Senior, patting the fast-trotting mare with the end of his whip. "I never keep a lady waiting--and I've got business to-night with one of your own sex!"

VII. THE MARTYRDOM OF MISS GWILT.

The outskirts of the little town of Thorpe Ambrose, on the side nearest to "the great house," have earned some local celebrity as exhibiting the prettiest suburb of the kind to be found in East Norfolk. Here the villas and gardens are for the most part built and laid out in excellent taste, the trees are in the prime of their growth, and the healthy common beyond the houses rises and falls in picturesque and delightful variety of broken ground. The rank, fashion, and beauty of the town make this place their evening promenade; and when a stranger goes out for a drive, if he leaves it to the coachman, the coachman starts by way of the common as a matter of course.

On the opposite side, that is to say, on the side furthest from "the great house," the suburbs (in the year 1851) were universally regarded as a sore subject by all persons zealous for the reputation of the town.

Here nature was uninviting, man was poor, and social progress, as exhibited under the form of building, halted miserably. The streets dwindled feebly, as they receded from the center of the town, into smaller and smaller houses, and died away on the barren open ground into an atrophy of skeleton cottages. Builders hereabouts appeared to have universally abandoned their work in the first stage of its creation. Land-holders set up poles on lost patches of ground, and, plaintively advertising that they were to let for building, raised sickly little crops meanwhile, in despair of finding a purchaser to deal with them. All the waste paper of the town seemed to float congenially to this neglected spot; and all the fretful children came and cried here, in charge of all the slatternly nurses who disgraced the place. If there was any intention in Thorpe Ambrose of sending a worn-out horse to the knacker's, that horse was sure to be found waiting his doom in a field on this side of the town. No growth flourished in these desert regions but the arid growth of rubbish; and no creatures rejoiced but the creatures of the night--the vermin here and there in the beds, and the cats everywhere on the tiles.

The sun had set, and the summer twilight was darkening. The fretful children were crying in their cradles; the horse destined for the knacker dozed forlorn in the field of his imprisonment; the cats waited stealthily in corners for the coming night. But one living figure appeared in the lonely suburb--the figure of Mr. Bashwood. But one faint sound disturbed the dreadful silence--the sound of Mr. Bashwood's softly stepping feet.

Moving slowly past the heaps of bricks rising at intervals along the road,

coasting carefully round the old iron and the broken tiles scattered here and there in his path, Mr. Bashwood advanced from the direction of the country toward one of the unfinished streets of the suburb. His personal appearance had been apparently made the object of some special attention. His false teeth were brilliantly white; his wig was carefully brushed; his mourning garments, renewed throughout, gleamed with the hideous and slimy gloss of cheap black cloth. He moved with a nervous jauntiness, and looked about him with a vacant smile. Having reached the first of the skeleton cottages, his watery eyes settled steadily for the first time on the view of the street before him. The next instant he started; his breath quickened; he leaned, trembling and flushing, against the unfinished wall at his side. A lady, still at some distance, was advancing toward him down the length of the street. "She's coming!" he whispered, with a strange mixture of rapture and fear, of alternating color and paleness, showing itself in his haggard face. "I wish I was the ground she treads on! I wish I was the glove she's got on her hand!" He burst ecstatically into those extravagant words, with a concentrated intensity of delight in uttering them that actually shook his feeble figure from head to foot.

Smoothly and gracefully the lady glided nearer and nearer, until she revealed to Mr. Bashwood's eyes, what Mr. Bashwood's instincts had recognized in the first instance--the face of Miss Gwilt.

She was dressed with an exquisitely expressive economy of outlay. The plainest straw bonnet procurable, trimmed sparingly with the cheapest white ribbon, was on her head. Modest and tasteful poverty expressed itself in the speckless cleanliness and the modestly proportioned skirts of her light "print" gown, and in the scanty little mantilla of cheap black silk which she wore over it, edged with a simple frilling of the same material. The luster of her terrible red hair showed itself unshrinkingly in a plaited coronet above her forehead, and escaped in one vagrant love-lock, perfectly curled, that dropped over her left shoulder. Her gloves, fitting her like a second skin, were of the sober brown hue which is slowest to show signs of use. One hand lifted her dress daintily above the impurities of the road; the other held a little nosegay of the commonest garden flowers. Noiselessly and smoothly she came on, with a gentle and regular undulation of the print gown; with the love-lock softly lifted from moment to moment in the evening breeze; with her head a little drooped, and her eyes on the ground--in walk, and look, and manner, in every casual movement that escaped her, expressing that subtle mixture of the voluptuous and the modest which, of the many attractive extremes that meet in women, is in a man's eyes the most irresistible of all.

"Mr. Bashwood!" she exclaimed, in loud, clear tones indicative of the utmost astonishment, "what a surprise to find you here! I thought none but the wretched inhabitants ever ventured near this side of the town. Hush!" she added quickly, in a whisper. "You heard right when you heard that Mr. Armadale was going to have me followed and watched. There's a man behind one of the houses. We must talk out loud of indifferent things, and look as if we had met by accident. Ask me what I am doing. Out loud! Directly! You shall never see me again, if you don't instantly leave off trembling and do what I tell you!"

She spoke with a merciless tyranny of eye and voice--with a merciless use of her power over the feeble creature whom she addressed. Mr. Bashwood obeyed her in tones that quavered with agitation, and with eyes that devoured her beauty in a strange fascination of terror and delight.

"I am trying to earn a little money by teaching music," she said, in the voice intended to reach the spy's ears. "If you are able to recommend me any pupils, Mr. Bashwood, your good word will oblige me. Have you been in the grounds to-day?" she went on, dropping her voice again in a whisper. "Has Mr. Armadale been near the cottage? Has Miss Milroy been out of the garden? No? Are you sure? Look out for them to-morrow, and next day, and next day. They are certain to meet and make it up again, and I must and will know of it. Hush! Ask me my terms for teaching music. What are you frightened about? It's me the man's after--not you. Louder than when you asked me what I was doing, just now; louder, or I won't trust you any more; I'll go to somebody else!"

Once more Mr. Bashwood obeyed. "Don't be angry with me," he murmured, faintly, when he had spoken the necessary words. "My heart beats so you'll kill me!"

"You poor old dear!" she whispered back, with a sudden change in her manner, with an easy satirical tenderness. "What business have you with a heart at your age? Be here to-morrow at the same time, and tell me what you have seen in the grounds. My terms are only five shillings a lesson," she went on, in her louder tone. "I'm sure that's not much, Mr. Bashwood; I give such long lessons, and I get all my pupils' music half-price." She suddenly dropped her voice again, and looked him brightly into instant subjection. "Don't let Mr. Armadale out of your sight to-morrow! If that girl manages to speak to him, and if I don't hear of it, I'll frighten you to death. If I do hear of it, I'll kiss you! Hush! Wish me good-night, and go on to the town, and leave me to go the other way. I don't want you--I'm not afraid of the man behind the houses; I can deal with him by myself. Say goodnight, and I'll let you

shake hands. Say it louder, and I'll give you one of my flowers, if you'll promise not to fall in love with it." She raised her voice again. "Goodnight, Mr. Bashwood! Don't forget my terms. Five shillings a lesson, and the lessons last an hour at a time, and I get all my pupils' music half-price, which is an immense advantage, isn't it?" She slipped a flower into his hand--frowned him into obedience, and smiled to reward him for obeying, at the same moment--lifted her dress again above the impurities of the road--and went on her way with a dainty and indolent deliberation, as a cat goes on her way when she has exhausted the enjoyment of frightening a mouse.

Left alone, Mr. Bashwood turned to the low cottage wall near which he had been standing, and, resting himself on it wearily, looked at the flower in his hand.

His past existence had disciplined him to bear disaster and insult, as few happier men could have borne them; but it had not prepared him to feel the master-passion of humanity, for the first time, at the dreary end of his life, in the hopeless decay of a manhood that had withered under the double blight of conjugal disappointment and parental sorrow. "Oh, if I was only young again!" murmured the poor wretch, resting his arms on the wall and touching the flower with his dry, fevered lips in a stealthy rapture of tenderness. "She might have liked me when I was twenty!" He suddenly started back into an erect position, and stared about him in vacant bewilderment and terror. "She told me to go home," he said, with a startled look. "Why am I stopping here?" He turned, and hurried on to the town--in such dread of her anger, if she looked round and saw him, that he never so much as ventured on a backward glance at the road by which she had retired, and never detected the spy dogging her footsteps, under cover of the empty houses and the brick-heaps by the roadside.

Smoothly and gracefully, carefully preserving the speckless integrity of her dress, never hastening her pace, and never looking aside to the right hand or the left, Miss Gwilt pursued her way toward the open country. The suburban road branched off at its end in two directions. On the left, the path wound through a ragged little coppice to the grazing grounds of a neighboring farm; on the right, it led across a hillock of waste land to the high-road. Stopping a moment to consider, but not showing the spy that she suspected him by glancing behind her while there was a hiding-place within his reach, Miss Gwilt took the path across the hillock. "I'll catch him there," she said to herself, looking up quietly at the long straight line of the empty high-road.

Once on the ground that she had chosen for her purpose, she met the

difficulties of the position with perfect tact and self-possession. After walking some thirty yards along the road, she let her nosegay drop, half turned round in stooping to pick it up, saw the man stopping at the same moment behind her, and instantly went on again, quickening her pace little by little, until she was walking at the top of her speed. The spy fell into the snare laid for him. Seeing the night coming, and fearing that he might lose sight of her in the darkness, he rapidly lessened the distance between them. Miss Gwilt went on faster and faster till she plainly heard his footstep behind her, then stopped, turned, and met the man face to face the next moment.

"My compliments to Mr. Armadale," she said, "and tell him I've caught you watching me."

"I'm not watching you, miss," retorted the spy, thrown off his guard by the daring plainness of the language in which she had spoken to him.

Miss Gwilt's eyes measured him contemptuously from head to foot. He was a weakly, undersized man. She was the taller, and (quite possibly) the stronger of the two.

"Take your hat off, you blackguard, when you speak to a lady," she said, and tossed his hat in an instant, across a ditch by which they were standing, into a pool on the other side.

This time the spy was on his guard. He knew as well as Miss Gwilt knew the use which might be made of the precious minutes, if he turned his back on her and crossed the ditch to recover his hat. "It's well for you you're a woman," he said, standing scowling at her bareheaded in the fast-darkening light.

Miss Gwilt glanced sidelong down the onward vista of the road, and saw, through the gathering obscurity, the solitary figure of a man rapidly advancing toward her. Some women would have noticed the approach of a stranger at that hour and in that lonely place with a certain anxiety. Miss Gwilt was too confident in her own powers of persuasion not to count on the man's assistance beforehand, whoever he might be, because he was a man. She looked back at the spy with redoubled confidence in herself, and measured him contemptuously from head to foot for the second time.

"I wonder whether I'm strong enough to throw you after your hat?" she said. "I'll take a turn and consider it."

She sauntered on a few steps toward the figure advancing along the road.

The spy followed her close. "Try it," he said, brutally. "You're a fine woman; you're welcome to put your arms round me if you like." As the words escaped him, he too saw the stranger for the first time. He drew back a step and waited. Miss Gwilt, on her side, advanced a step and waited, too.

The stranger came on, with the lithe, light step of a practiced walker, swinging a stick in his hand and carrying a knapsack on his shoulders. A few paces nearer, and his face became visible. He was a dark man, his black hair was powdered with dust, and his black eyes were looking steadfastly forward along the road before him.

Miss Gwilt advanced with the first signs of agitation she had shown yet. "Is it possible?" she said, softly. "Can it really be you?"

It was Midwinter, on his way back to Thorpe Ambrose, after his fortnight among the Yorkshire moors.

He stopped and looked at her, in breathless surprise. The image of the woman had been in his thoughts, at the moment when the woman herself spoke to him. "Miss Gwilt!" he exclaimed, and mechanically held out his hand.

She took it, and pressed it gently. "I should have been glad to see you at any time," she said. "You don't know how glad I am to see you now. May I trouble you to speak to that man? He has been following me, and annoying me all the way from the town."

Midwinter stepped past her without uttering a word. Faint as the light was, the spy saw what was coming in his face, and, turning instantly, leaped the ditch by the road-side. Before Midwinter could follow, Miss Gwilt's hand was on his shoulder.

"No," she said, "you don't know who his employer is."

Midwinter stopped and looked at her.

"Strange things have happened since you left us," she went on. "I have been forced to give up my situation, and I am followed and watched by a paid spy. Don't ask who forced me out of my situation, and who pays the spy--at least not just yet. I can't make up my mind to tell you till I am a little more composed. Let the wretch go. Do you mind seeing me safe back to my lodging? It's in your way home. May I--may I ask for the support of your arm? My little stock of courage is quite exhausted." She took his arm and