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WILKIE COLLINS

ARMADALE III

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When the elderly Allan Armadale makes a terrible confession on his death-bed, he has little idea of the repercussions to come, for the secret he reveals involves the mysterious Lydia Gwilt: flamed-hair temptress, bigamist, laudanum addict and husband-poisoner. This traditional melodrama also considers the modern theme of the role of women in society.

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BOOK THE THIRD

CHAPTER I

MRS. MILROY

Two days after Midwinter's departure from Thorpe Ambrose, Mrs. Milroy, having completed her morning toilet, and having dismissed her nurse, rang the bell again five minutes afterward, and on the woman's re-appearance asked impatiently if the post had come in.

"Post?" echoed the nurse. "Haven't you got your watch? Don't you know that it's a good half-hour too soon to ask for your letters?" She spoke with the confident insolence of a servant long accustomed to presume on her mistress's weakness and her mistress's necessities. Mrs. Milroy, on her side, appeared to be well used to her nurses manner; she gave her orders composedly, without noticing it.

"When the postman does come," she said, "see him yourself. I am expecting a letter which I ought to have had two days since. I don't understand it. I'm beginning to suspect the servants."

The nurse smiled contemptuously. "Whom will you suspect next?" she asked. "There! don't put yourself out. I'll answer the gate-bell this morning; and we'll see if I can't bring you a letter when the postman comes." Saying those words, with the tone

and manner of a woman who is quieting a fractious child, the nurse, without waiting to be dismissed, left the room.

Mrs. Milroy turned slowly and wearily on her bed, when she was left by herself again, and let the light from the window fall on her face. It was the face of a woman who had once been handsome, and who was still, so far as years went, in the prime of her life. Long-continued suffering of body and long-continued irritation of mind had worn her away – in the roughly expressive popular phrase – to skin and bone. The utter wreck of her beauty was made a wreck horrible to behold, by her desperate efforts to conceal the sight of it from her own eyes, from the eyes of her husband and her child, from the eyes even of the doctor who attended her, and whose business it was to penetrate to the truth. Her head, from which the greater part of the hair had fallen off; would have been less shocking to see than the hideously youthful wig by which she tried to hide the loss. No deterioration of her complexion, no wrinkling of her skin, could have been so dreadful to look at as the rouge that lay thick on her cheeks, and the white enamel plastered on her forehead. The delicate lace, and the bright trimming on her dressing-gown, the ribbons in her cap, and the rings on her bony fingers, all intended to draw the eye away from the change that had passed over her, directed the eye to it, on the contrary; emphasized it; made it by sheer force of contrast more hopeless and more horrible than it really was. An illustrated book of the fashions, in which women were represented exhibiting their finery by means of the free use of their limbs, lay on the bed, from which she had not moved for years without being lifted by her nurse. A hand-glass was placed with

the book so that she could reach it easily. She took up the glass after her attendant had left the room, and looked at her face with an unblushing interest and attention which she would have been ashamed of herself at the age of eighteen.

"Older and older, and thinner and thinner!" she said. "The major will soon be a free man; but I'll have that red-haired hussy out of the house first!"

She dropped the looking-glass on the counterpane, and clinched the hand that held it. Her eyes suddenly riveted themselves on a little crayon portrait of her husband hanging on the opposite wall; they looked at the likeness with the hard and cruel brightness of the eyes of a bird of prey. "Red is your taste in your old age is it?" she said to the portrait. "Red hair, and a scrofulous complexion, and a padded figure, a ballet-girl's walk, and a pickpocket's light fingers. *Miss Gwilt! Miss, with those eyes, and that walk!*" She turned her head suddenly on the pillow, and burst into a harsh, jeering laugh. "*Miss!*" she repeated over and over again, with the venomously pointed emphasis of the most merciless of all human forms of contempt – the contempt of one woman for another.

The age we live in is an age which finds no human creature inexcusable. Is there an excuse for Mrs. Milroy? Let the story of her life answer the question.

She had married the major at an unusually early age; and, in marrying him, had taken a man for her husband who was old enough to be her father – a man who, at that time, had the reputation, and not unjustly, of having made the freest use of his social gifts and his advantages of personal appearance in the society of women. Indifferently educated, and below her

husband in station, she had begun by accepting his addresses under the influence of her own flattered vanity, and had ended by feeling the fascination which Major Milroy had exercised over women infinitely her mental superiors in his earlier life. He had been touched, on his side, by her devotion, and had felt, in his turn, the attraction of her beauty, her freshness, and her youth. Up to the time when their little daughter and only child had reached the age of eight years, their married life had been an unusually happy one. At that period the double misfortune fell on the household, of the failure of the wife's health, and the almost total loss of the husband's fortune; and from that moment the domestic happiness of the married pair was virtually at an end.

Having reached the age when men in general are readier, under the pressure of calamity, to resign themselves than to resist, the major had secured the little relics of his property, had retired into the country, and had patiently taken refuge in his mechanical pursuits. A woman nearer to him in age, or a woman with a better training and more patience of disposition than his wife possessed, would have understood the major's conduct, and have found consolation in the major's submission. Mrs. Milroy found consolation in nothing. Neither nature nor training helped her to meet resignedly the cruel calamity which had struck at her in the bloom of womanhood and the prime of beauty. The curse of incurable sickness blighted her at once and for life.

Suffering can, and does, develop the latent evil that there is in humanity, as well as the latent good. The good that was in Mrs. Milroy's nature shrank up, under that subtly deteriorat-

ing influence in which the evil grew and flourished. Month by month, as she became the weaker woman physically, she became the worse woman morally. All that was mean, cruel, and false in her expanded in steady proportion to the contraction of all that had once been generous, gentle, and true. Old suspicions of her husband's readiness to relapse into the irregularities of his bachelor life, which, in her healthier days of mind and body, she had openly confessed to him – which she had always sooner or later seen to be suspicions that he had not deserved – came back, now that sickness had divorced her from him, in the form of that baser conjugal distrust which keeps itself cunningly secret; which gathers together its inflammatory particles atom by atom into a heap, and sets the slowly burning frenzy of jealousy alight in the mind. No proof of her husband's blameless and patient life that could now be shown to Mrs. Milroy; no appeal that could be made to her respect for herself, or for her child growing up to womanhood, availed to dissipate the terrible delusion born of her hopeless illness, and growing steadily with its growth. Like all other madness, it had its ebb and flow, its time of spasmodic outburst, and its time of deceitful repose; but, active or passive, it was always in her. It had injured innocent servants, and insulted blameless strangers. It had brought the first tears of shame and sorrow into her daughter's eyes, and had set the deepest lines that scored it in her husband's face. It had made the secret misery of the little household for years; and it was now to pass beyond the family limits, and to influence coming events at Thorpe Ambrose, in which the future interests of Allan and Allan's friend were vitally concerned.

A moment's glance at the posture of domestic affairs in the cottage, prior to the engagement of the new governess, is necessary to the due appreciation of the serious consequences that followed Miss Gwilt's appearance on the scene.

On the marriage of the governess who had lived in his service for many years (a woman of an age and an appearance to set even Mrs. Milroy's jealousy at defiance), the major had considered the question of sending his daughter away from home far more seriously than his wife supposed. He was conscious that scenes took place in the house at which no young girl should be present; but he felt an invincible reluctance to apply the one efficient remedy – the keeping his daughter away from home in school time and holiday time alike. The struggle thus raised in his mind once set at rest, by the resolution to advertise for a new governess, Major Milroy's natural tendency to avoid trouble rather than to meet it had declared itself in its customary manner. He had closed his eyes again on his home anxieties as quietly as usual, and had gone back, as he had gone back on hundreds of previous occasions, to the consoling society of his old friend the clock.

It was far otherwise with the major's wife. The chance which her husband had entirely overlooked, that the new governess who was to come might be a younger and a more attractive woman than the old governess who had gone, was the first chance that presented itself as possible to Mrs. Milroy's mind. She had said nothing. Secretly waiting, and secretly nursing her inveterate distrust, she had encouraged her husband and her daughter to leave her on the occasion of the picnic, with the express purpose of making an opportunity for seeing the new governess alone. The governess had shown herself; and

the smoldering fire of Mrs. Milroy's jealousy had burst into flame in the moment when she and the handsome stranger first set eyes on each other.

The interview over, Mrs. Milroy's suspicions fastened at once and immovably on her husband's mother.

She was well aware that there was no one else in London on whom the major could depend to make the necessary inquiries; she was well aware that Miss Gwilt had applied for the situation, in the first instance, as a stranger answering an advertisement published in a newspaper. Yet knowing this, she had obstinately closed her eyes, with the blind frenzy of the blindest of all the passions, to the facts straight before her; and, looking back to the last of many quarrels between them which had ended in separating the elder lady and herself, had seized on the conclusion that Miss Gwilt's engagement was due to her mother-in-law's vindictive enjoyment of making mischief in her household. The inference which the very servants themselves, witnesses of the family scandal, had correctly drawn – that the major's mother, in securing the services of a well-recommended governess for her son, had thought it no part of her duty to consider that governess's looks in the purely fanciful interests of the major's wife – was an inference which it was simply impossible to convey into Mrs. Milroy's mind. Miss Gwilt had barely closed the sick-room door when the whispered words hissed out of Mrs. Milroy's lips, "Before another week is over your head, my lady, you go!"

From that moment, through the wakeful night and the weary day, the one object of the bedridden woman's life was to procure the new governess's dismissal from the house.

The assistance of the nurse, in the capacity of spy, was secured – as Mrs. Milroy had been accustomed to secure other extra services which her attendant was not bound to render her – by a present of a dress from the mistress's wardrobe. One after another articles of wearing apparel which were now useless to Mrs. Milroy had ministered in this way to feed the nurse's greed – the insatiable greed of an ugly woman for fine clothes. Bribed with the smartest dress she had secured yet, the household spy took her secret orders, and applied herself with a vile enjoyment of it to her secret work.

The days passed, the work went on; but nothing had come of it. Mistress and servant had a woman to deal with who was a match for both of them.

Repeated intrusions on the major, when the governess happened to be in the same room with him, failed to discover the slightest impropriety of word, look, or action, on either side. Stealthy watching and listening at the governess's bedroom door detected that she kept a light in her room at late hours of the night, and that she groaned and ground her teeth in her sleep – and detected nothing more. Careful superintendence in the day-time proved that she regularly posted her own letters, instead of giving them to the servant; and that on certain occasions, when the occupation of her hours out of lesson time and walking time was left at her own disposal, she had been suddenly missed from the garden, and then caught coming back alone to it from the park. Once and once only, the nurse had found an opportunity of following her out of the garden, had been detected immediately in the park, and had been asked with the most exasperating politeness if she

wished to join Miss Gwilt in a walk. Small circumstances of this kind, which were sufficiently suspicious to the mind of a jealous woman, were discovered in abundance. But circumstances, on which to found a valid ground of complaint that might be laid before the major, proved to be utterly wanting. Day followed day, and Miss Gwilt remained persistently correct in her conduct, and persistently irreproachable in her relations toward her employer and her pupil.

Foiled in this direction, Mrs. Milroy tried next to find an assailable place in the statement which the governess's reference had made on the subject of the governess's character.

Obtaining from the major the minutely careful report which his mother had addressed to him on this topic, Mrs. Milroy read and reread it, and failed to find the weak point of which she was in search in any part of the letter. All the customary questions on such occasions had been asked, and all had been scrupulously and plainly answered. The one sole opening for an attack which it was possible to discover was an opening which showed itself, after more practical matters had been all disposed of, in the closing sentences of the letter.

"I was so struck," the passage ran, "by the grace and distinction of Miss Gwilt's manners that I took an opportunity, when she was out of the room, of asking how she first came to be governess. 'In the usual way,' I was told. 'A sad family misfortune, in which she behaved nobly. She is a very sensitive person, and shrinks from speaking of it among strangers – a natural reluctance which I have always felt it a matter of delicacy to respect.' Hearing this, of course, I felt the same delicacy on my side. It was no part of my duty to intrude on the poor

thing's private sorrows; my only business was to do what I have now done, to make sure that I was engaging a capable and respectable governess to instruct my grandchild."

After careful consideration of these lines, Mrs. Milroy, having a strong desire to find circumstances suspicious, found them suspicious accordingly. She determined to sift the mystery of Miss Gwilt's family misfortunes to the bottom, on the chance of extracting from it something useful to her purpose. There were two ways of doing this. She might begin by questioning the governess herself, or she might begin by questioning the governess's reference. Experience of Miss Gwilt's quickness of resource in dealing with awkward questions at their introductory interview decided her on taking the latter course. "I'll get the particulars from the reference first," thought Mrs. Milroy, "and then question the creature herself, and see if the two stories agree."

The letter of inquiry was short, and scrupulously to the point.

Mrs. Milroy began by informing her correspondent that the state of her health necessitated leaving her daughter entirely under the governess's influence and control. On that account she was more anxious than most mothers to be thoroughly informed in every respect about the person to whom she confided the entire charge of an only child; and feeling this anxiety, she might perhaps be excused for putting what might be thought, after the excellent character Miss Gwilt had received, a somewhat unnecessary question. With that preface, Mrs. Milroy came to the point, and requested to be informed

of the circumstances which had obliged Miss Gwilt to go out as a governess.

The letter, expressed in these terms, was posted the same day. On the morning when the answer was due, no answer appeared. The next morning arrived, and still there was no reply. When the third morning came, Mrs. Milroy's impatience had broken loose from all restraint. She had rung for the nurse in the manner which has been already recorded, and had ordered the woman to be in waiting to receive the letters of the morning with her own hands. In this position matters now stood; and in these domestic circumstances the new series of events at Thorpe Ambrose took their rise.

Mrs. Milroy had just looked at her watch, and had just put her hand once more to the bell-pull, when the door opened and the nurse entered the room.

"Has the postman come?" asked Mrs. Milroy.

The nurse laid a letter on the bed without answering, and waited, with unconcealed curiosity, to watch the effect which it produced on her mistress.

Mrs. Milroy tore open the envelope the instant it was in her hand. A printed paper appeared (which she threw aside), surrounding a letter (which she looked at) in her own handwriting! She snatched up the printed paper. It was the customary Post-office circular, informing her that her letter had been duly presented at the right address, and that the person whom she had written to was not to be found.

"Something wrong?" asked the nurse, detecting a change in her mistress's face.

The question passed unheeded. Mrs. Milroy's writing-desk was on the table at the bedside. She took from it the letter which the major's mother had written to her son, and turned to the page containing the name and address of Miss Gwilt's reference. "Mrs. Mandeville, 18 Kingsdown Crescent, Bayswater," she read, eagerly to herself, and then looked at the address on her own returned letter. No error had been committed: the directions were identically the same.

"Something wrong?" reiterated the nurse, advancing a step nearer to the bed.

"Thank God — yes!" cried Mrs. Milroy, with a sudden outburst of exultation. She tossed the Post-office circular to the nurse, and beat her bony hands on the bedclothes in an ecstasy of anticipated triumph. "Miss Gwilt's an impostor! Miss Gwilt's an impostor! If I die for it, Rachel, I'll be carried to the window to see the police take her away!"

"It's one thing to say she's an impostor behind her back, and another thing to prove it to her face," remarked the nurse. She put her hand as she spoke into her apron pocket, and, with a significant look at her mistress, silently produced a second letter.

"For me?" asked Mrs. Milroy.

"No!" said the nurse; "for Miss Gwilt."

The two women eyed each other, and understood each other without another word.

"Where is she?" said Mrs. Milroy.

The nurse pointed in the direction of the park. "Out again, for another walk before breakfast — by herself."

Mrs. Milroy beckoned to the nurse to stoop close over her. "Can you open it, Rachel?" she whispered.

Rachel nodded.

"Can you close it again, so that nobody would know?"

"Can you spare the scarf that matches your pearl gray dress?" asked Rachel.

"Take it!" said Mrs. Milroy, impatiently.

The nurse opened the wardrobe in silence, took the scarf in silence, and left the room in silence. In less than five minutes she came back with the envelope of Miss Gwilt's letter open in her hand.

"Thank you, ma'am, for the scarf," said Rachel, putting the open letter composedly on the counterpane of the bed.

Mrs. Milroy looked at the envelope. It had been closed as usual by means of adhesive gum, which had been made to give way by the application of steam. As Mrs. Milroy took out the letter, her hand trembled violently, and the white enamel parted into cracks over the wrinkles on her forehead.

Rachel withdrew to the window to keep watch on the park. "Don't hurry," she said. "No signs of her yet."

Mrs. Milroy still paused, keeping the all-important morsel of paper folded in her hand. She could have taken Miss Gwilt's life, but she hesitated at reading Miss Gwilt's letter.

"Are you troubled with scruples?" asked the nurse, with a sneer. "Consider it a duty you owe to your daughter."

"You wretch!" said Mrs. Milroy. With that expression of opinion, she opened the letter.

It was evidently written in great haste, was undated, and was signed in initials only. Thus it ran:

"Diana Street.

"MY DEAR LYDIA — The cab is waiting at the door, and I have only a moment to tell you that I am obliged to leave London, on business, for three or four days, or a week at longest. My letters will be forwarded if you write. I got yours yesterday, and I agree with you that it is very important to put him off the awkward subject of yourself and your family as long as you safely can. The better you know him, the better you will be able to make up the sort of story that will do. Once told, you will have to stick to it; and, having to stick to it, beware of making it complicated, and beware of making it in a hurry. I will write again about this, and give you my own ideas. In the meantime, don't risk meeting him too often in the park.

"Yours, M. O."

"Well?" asked the nurse, returning to the bedside. "Have you done with it?"

"Meeting him in the park!" repeated Mrs. Milroy, with her eyes still fastened on the letter. "Him! Rachel, where is the major?"

"In his own room."

"I don't believe it!"

"Have your own way. I want the letter and the envelope."

"Can you close it again so that she won't know?"

"What I can open I can shut. Anything more?"

"Nothing more."

Mrs. Milroy was left alone again, to review her plan of attack by the new light that had now been thrown on Miss Gwilt.

The information that had been gained by opening the governess's letter pointed plainly to the conclusion that an adventuress had stolen her way into the house by means of a false reference. But having been obtained by an act of treachery which it was impossible to acknowledge, it was not information that could be used either for warning the major or for exposing Miss Gwilt. The one available weapon in Mrs. Milroy's hands was the weapon furnished by her own returned letter, and the one question to decide was how to make the best and speediest use of it.

The longer she turned the matter over in her mind, the more hasty and premature seemed the exultation which she had felt at the first sight of the Post-office circular. That a lady acting as reference to a governess should have quitted her residence without leaving any trace behind her, and without even mentioning an address to which her letters could be forwarded, was a circumstance in itself sufficiently suspicious to be mentioned to the major. But Mrs. Milroy, however perverted her estimate of her husband might be in some respects, knew enough of his character to be assured that, if she told him what had happened, he would frankly appeal to the governess herself for an explanation. Miss Gwilt's quickness and cunning would, in that case, produce some plausible answer on the spot, which the major's partiality would be only too ready to accept; and she would at the same time, no doubt, place matters in train, by means of the post, for the due arrival of all needful confirmation on the part of her accomplice in London. To keep strict silence for the present, and to institute (without the governess's knowledge) such inquiries as might be neces-

sary to the discovery of undeniable evidence, was plainly the only safe course to take with such a man as the major, and with such a woman as Miss Gwilt. Helpless herself, to whom could Mrs. Milroy commit the difficult and dangerous task of investigation? The nurse, even if she was to be trusted, could not be spared at a day's notice, and could not be sent away without the risk of exciting remark. Was there any other competent and reliable person to employ, either at Thorpe Ambrose or in London? Mrs. Milroy turned from side to side of the bed, searching every corner of her mind for the needful discovery, and searching in vain. "Oh, if I could only lay my hand on some man I could trust!" she thought, despairingly. "If I only knew where to look for somebody to help me!"

As the idea passed through her mind, the sound of her daughter's voice startled her from the other side of the door.

"May I come in?" asked Neelie.

"What do you want?" returned Mrs. Milroy, impatiently.

"I have brought up your breakfast, mamma."

"My breakfast?" repeated Mrs. Milroy, in surprise. "Why doesn't Rachel bring it up as usual?" She considered a moment, and then called out, sharply, "Come in!"

CHAPTER II

THE MAN IS FOUND

Neelie entered the room, carrying the tray with the tea, the dry toast, and the pat of butter which composed the invalid's invariable breakfast.

"What does this mean?" asked Mrs. Milroy, speaking and looking as she might have spoken and looked if the wrong servant had come into the room.

Neelie put the tray down on the bedside table. "I thought I should like to bring you up your breakfast, mamma, for once in a way," she replied, "and I asked Rachel to let me."

"Come here," said Mrs. Milroy, "and wish me good-morning."

Neelie obeyed. As she stooped to kiss her mother, Mrs. Milroy caught her by the arm, and turned her roughly to the light. There were plain signs of disturbance and distress in her daughter's face. A deadly thrill of terror ran through Mrs. Milroy on the instant. She suspected that the opening of the letter had been discovered by Miss Gwilt, and that the nurse was keeping out of the way in consequence.

"Let me go, mamma," said Neelie, shrinking under her mother's grasp. "You hurt me."

"Tell me why you have brought up my breakfast this morning," persisted Mrs. Milroy.

"I have told you, mamma."

"You have not! You have made an excuse; I see it in your face. Come! what is it?"

Neelie's resolution gave way before her mother's. She looked aside uneasily at the things in the tray. "I have been vexed," she said, with an effort; "and I didn't want to stop in the breakfast-room. I wanted to come up here, and to speak to you."

"Vexed? Who has vexed you? What has happened? Has Miss Gwilt anything to do with it?"

Neelie looked round again at her mother in sudden curiosity and alarm. "Mamma!" she said, "you read my thoughts. I declare you frighten me. It *was* Miss Gwilt."

Before Mrs. Milroy could say a word more on her side, the door opened and the nurse looked in.

"Have you got what you want?" she asked, as composedly as usual. "Miss, there, insisted on taking your tray up this morning. Has she broken anything?"

"Go to the window. I want to speak to Rachel," said Mrs. Milroy.

As soon as her daughter's back was turned, she beckoned eagerly to the nurse. "Anything wrong?" she asked, in a whisper. "Do you think she suspects us?"

The nurse turned away with her hard, sneering smile. "I told you it should be done," she said, "and it *has* been done. She hasn't the ghost of a suspicion. I waited in the room; and I saw her take up the letter and open it."

Mrs. Milroy drew a deep breath of relief. "Thank you," she said, loud enough for her daughter to hear. "I want nothing more."

The nurse withdrew; and Neelie came back from the window. Mrs. Milroy took her by the hand, and looked at her more attentively and more kindly than usual. Her daughter interested her that morning; for her daughter had something to say on the subject of Miss Gwilt.

"I used to think that you promised to be pretty, child," she said, cautiously resuming the interrupted conversation in the least direct way. "But you don't seem to be keeping your promise. You look out of health and out of spirits. What is the matter with you?"

If there had been any sympathy between mother and child, Neelie might have owned the truth. She might have said frankly: "I am looking ill, because my life is miserable to me. I am fond of Mr. Armadale, and Mr. Armadale was once fond of me. We had one little disagreement, only one, in which I was to blame. I wanted to tell him so at the time, and I have wanted to tell him so ever since; and Miss Gwilt stands between us and prevents me. She has made us like strangers; she has altered him, and taken him away from me. He doesn't look at me as he did; he doesn't speak to me as he did; he is never alone with me as he used to be; I can't say the words to him that I long to say; and I can't write to him, for it would look as if I wanted to get him back. It is all over between me and Mr. Armadale; and it is that woman's fault. There is ill-blood between Miss Gwilt and me the whole day long; and say what I may, and do what I may, she always gets the better of me, and always puts me in

the wrong. Everything I saw at Thorpe Ambrose pleased me, everything I did at Thorpe Ambrose made me happy, before she came. Nothing pleases me, and nothing makes me happy now!" If Neelie had ever been accustomed to ask her mother's advice and to trust herself to her mother's love, she might have said such words as these. As it was, the tears came into her eyes, and she hung her head in silence.

"Come!" said Mrs. Milroy, beginning to lose patience. "You have something to say to me about Miss Gwilt. What is it?"

Neelie forced back her tears, and made an effort to answer.

"She aggravates me beyond endurance, mamma; I can't bear her; I shall do something –" Neelie stopped, and stamped her foot angrily on the floor. "I shall throw something at her head if we go on much longer like this! I should have thrown something this morning if I hadn't left the room. Oh, do speak to papa about it! Do find out some reason for sending her away! I'll go to school – I'll do anything in the world to get rid of Miss Gwilt!"

To get rid of Miss Gwilt! At those words – at that echo from her daughter's lips of the one dominant desire kept secret in her own heart – Mrs. Milroy slowly raised herself in bed. What did it mean? Was the help she wanted coming from the very last of all quarters in which she could have thought of looking for it?

"Why do you want to get rid of Miss Gwilt?" she asked. "What have you got to complain of?"

"Nothing!" said Neelie. "That's the aggravation of it. Miss Gwilt won't let me have anything to complain of. She is per-

factly detestable; she is driving me mad; and she is the pink of propriety all the time. I dare say it's wrong, but I don't care – I hate her!"

Mrs. Milroy's eyes questioned her daughter's face as they had never questioned it yet. There was something under the surface, evidently – something which it might be of vital importance to her own purpose to discover – which had not risen into view. She went on probing her way deeper and deeper into Neelie's mind, with a warmer and warmer interest in Neelie's secret.

"Pour me out a cup of tea," she said; "and don't excite yourself, my dear. Why do you speak to *me* about this? Why don't you speak to your father?"

"I have tried to speak to papa," said Neelie. "But it's no use; he is too good to know what a wretch she is. She is always on her best behavior with him; she is always contriving to be useful to him. I can't make him understand why I dislike Miss Gwilt; I can't make *you* understand – I only understand it myself." She tried to pour out the tea, and in trying upset the cup. "I'll go downstairs again!" exclaimed Neelie, with a burst of tears. "I'm not fit for anything; I can't even pour out a cup of tea!"

Mrs. Milroy seized her hand and stopped her. Trifling as it was, Neelie's reference to the relations between the major and Miss Gwilt had roused her mother's ready jealousy. The restraints which Mrs. Milroy had laid on herself thus far vanished in a moment – vanished even in the presence of a girl of sixteen, and that girl her own child!

“Wait here!” she said, eagerly. “You have come to the right place and the right person. Go on abusing Miss Gwilt. I like to hear you – I hate her, too!”

“You, mamma!” exclaimed Neelie, looking at her mother in astonishment.

For a moment Mrs. Milroy hesitated before she said more. Some last-left instinct of her married life in its earlier and happier time pleaded hard with her to respect the youth and the sex of her child. But jealousy respects nothing; in the heaven above and on the earth beneath, nothing but itself. The slow fire of self-torment, burning night and day in the miserable woman’s breast, flashed its deadly light into her eyes, as the next words dropped slowly and venomously from her lips.

“If you had had eyes in your head, you would never have gone to your father,” she said. “Your father has reasons of his own for hearing nothing that you can say, or that anybody can say, against Miss Gwilt.”

Many girls at Neelie’s age would have failed to see the meaning hidden under those words. It was the daughter’s misfortune, in this instance, to have had experience enough of the mother to understand her. Neelie started back from the bedside, with her face in a glow. “Mamma!” she said, “you are talking horribly! Papa is the best, and dearest, and kindest – oh, I won’t hear it! I won’t hear it!”

Mrs. Milroy’s fierce temper broke out in an instant – broke out all the more violently from her feeling herself, in spite of herself, to have been in the wrong.

“You impudent little fool!” she retorted, furiously. “Do you think I want *you* to remind me of what I owe to your father?”

Am I to learn how to speak of your father, and how to think of your father, and how to love and honor your father, from a forward little minx like you! I was finely disappointed, I can tell you, when you were born – I wished for a boy, you impudent hussy! If you ever find a man who is fool enough to marry you, he will be a lucky man if you only love him half as well, a quarter as well, a hundred-thousandth part as well, as I loved your father. Ah, you can cry when it's too late; you can come creeping back to beg your mother's pardon after you have insulted her. You little dowdy, half-grown creature! I was handsomer than ever you will be when I married your father. I would have gone through fire and water to serve your father! If he had asked me to cut off one of my arms, I would have done it – I would have done it to please him!" She turned suddenly with her face to the wall, forgetting her daughter, forgetting her husband, forgetting everything but the torturing remembrance of her lost beauty. "My arms!" she repeated to herself, faintly. "What arms I had when I was young!" She snatched up the sleeve of her dressing-gown furtively, with a shudder. "Oh, look at it now! look at it now!"

Neelie fell on her knees at the bedside and hid her face. In sheer despair of finding comfort and help anywhere else, she had cast herself impulsively on her mother's mercy; and this was how it had ended! "Oh, mamma," she pleaded, "you know I didn't mean to offend you! I couldn't help it when you spoke so of my father. Oh, do, do forgive me!"

Mrs. Milroy turned again on her pillow, and looked at her daughter vacantly. "Forgive you?" she repeated, with her mind still in the past, groping its way back darkly to the present.

"I beg your pardon, mamma – I beg your pardon on my knees. I am so unhappy; I do so want a little kindness! Won't you forgive me?"

"Wait a little," rejoined Mrs. Milroy. "Ah," she said, after an interval, "now I know! Forgive you? Yes; I'll forgive you on one condition." She lifted Neelie's head, and looked her searchingly in the face. "Tell me why you hate Miss Gwilt! You've a reason of your own for hating her, and you haven't confessed it yet."

Neelie's head dropped again. The burning color that she was hiding by hiding her face showed itself on her neck. Her mother saw it, and gave her time.

"Tell me," reiterated Mrs. Milroy, more gently, "why do you hate her?"

The answer came reluctantly, a word at a time, in fragments.

"Because she is trying –"

"Trying what?"

"Trying to make somebody who is much –"

"Much what?"

"Much too young for her –"

"Marry her?"

"Yes, mamma."

Breathlessly interested, Mrs. Milroy leaned forward, and twined her hand caressingly in her daughter's hair.

"Who is it, Neelie?" she asked, in a whisper.

"You will never say I told you, mamma?"

"Never! Who is it?"

"Mr. Armadale."

Mrs. Milroy leaned back on her pillow in dead silence. The plain betrayal of her daughter's first love, by her daughter's own lips, which would have absorbed the whole attention of other mothers, failed to occupy her for a moment. Her jealousy, distorting all things to fit its own conclusions, was busied in distorting what she had just heard. "A blind," she thought, "which has deceived my girl. It doesn't deceive *me*. Is Miss Gwilt likely to succeed?" she asked, aloud. "Does Mr. Armadale show any sort of interest in her?"

Neelie looked up at her mother for the first time. The hardest part of the confession was over now. She had revealed the truth about Miss Gwilt, and she had openly mentioned Allan's name.

"He shows the most unaccountable interest," she said. "It's impossible to understand it. It's downright infatuation. I haven't patience to talk about it!"

"How do *you* come to be in Mr. Armadale's secrets?" inquired Mrs. Milroy. "Has he informed *you*, of all the people in the world, of his interest in Miss Gwilt?"

"Me!" exclaimed Neelie, indignantly. "It's quite bad enough that he should have told papa."

At the re-appearance of the major in the narrative, Mrs. Milroy's interest in the conversation rose to its climax. She raised herself again from the pillow. "Get a chair," she said. "Sit down, child, and tell me all about it. Every word, mind – every word!"

"I can only tell you, mamma, what papa told me."

"When?"

"Saturday. I went in with papa's lunch to the workshop, and he said, 'I have just had a visit from Mr. Armadale; and I want to give you a caution while I think of it.' I didn't say anything, mamma; I only waited. Papa went on, and told me that Mr. Armadale had been speaking to him on the subject of Miss Gwilt, and that he had been asking a question about her which nobody in his position had a right to ask. Papa said he had been obliged, good-humoredly, to warn Mr. Armadale to be a little more delicate, and a little more careful next time. I didn't feel much interested, mamma; it didn't matter to *me* what Mr. Armadale said or did. Why should I care about it?"

"Never mind yourself," interposed Mrs. Milroy, sharply. "Go on with what your father said. What was he doing when he was talking about Miss Gwilt? How did he look?"

"Much as usual, mamma. He was walking up and down the workshop; and I took his arm and walked up and down with him."

"I don't care what *you* were doing," said Mrs. Milroy, more and more irritably. "Did your father tell you what Mr. Armadale's question was, or did he not?"

"Yes, mamma. He said Mr. Armadale began by mentioning that he was very much interested in Miss Gwilt, and he then went on to ask whether papa could tell him anything about her family misfortunes —"

"What!" cried Mrs. Milroy. The word burst from her almost in a scream, and the white enamel on her face cracked in all directions. "Mr. Armadale said *that*?" she went on, leaning out further and further over the side of the bed.

Neelie started up, and tried to put her mother back on the pillow.

"Mamma!" she exclaimed, "are you in pain? Are you ill? You frighten me!"

"Nothing, nothing, nothing," said Mrs. Milroy. She was too violently agitated to make any other than the commonest excuse. "My nerves are bad this morning; don't notice it. I'll try the other side of the pillow. Go on! go on! I'm listening, though I'm not looking at you." She turned her face to the wall, and clinched her trembling hands convulsively beneath the bedclothes. "I've got her!" she whispered to herself, under her breath. "I've got her at last!"

"I'm afraid I've been talking too much," said Neelie. "I'm afraid I've been stopping here too long. Shall I go downstairs, mamma, and come back later in the day?"

"Go on," repeated Mrs. Milroy, mechanically. "What did your father say next? Anything more about Mr. Armadale?"

"Nothing more, except how papa answered him," replied Neelie. "Papa repeated his own words when he told me about it. He said, 'In the absence of any confidence volunteered by the lady herself, Mr. Armadale, all I know or wish to know – and you must excuse me for saying, all any one else need know or wish to know – is that Miss Gwilt gave me a perfectly satisfactory reference before she entered my house.' Severe, mamma, wasn't it? I don't pity him in the least; he richly deserved it. The next thing was papa's caution to *me*. He told me to check Mr. Armadale's curiosity if he applied to me next. As if he was likely to apply to me! And as if I should listen to him if he did! That's all, mamma. You won't suppose, will you, that I have

told you this because I want to hinder Mr. Armadale from marrying Miss Gwilt? Let him marry her if he pleases; I don't care!" said Neelie, in a voice that faltered a little, and with a face which was hardly composed enough to be in perfect harmony with a declaration of indifference. "All I want is to be relieved from the misery of having Miss Gwilt for my governess. I'd rather go to school. I should like to go to school. My mind's quite changed about all that, only I haven't the heart to tell papa. I don't know what's come to me, I don't seem to have heart enough for anything now; and when papa takes me on his knee in the evening, and says, 'Let's have a talk, Neelie,' he makes me cry. Would you mind breaking it to him, mamma, that I've changed my mind, and I want to go to school?" The tears rose thickly in her eyes, and she failed to see that her mother never even turned on the pillow to look round at her.

"Yes, yes," said Mrs. Milroy, vacantly. "You're a good girl; you shall go to school."

The cruel brevity of the reply, and the tone in which it was spoken, told Neelie plainly that her mother's attention had been wandering far away from her, and that it was useless and needless to prolong the interview. She turned aside quietly, without a word of remonstrance. It was nothing new in her experience to find herself shut out from her mother's sympathies. She looked at her eyes in the glass, and, pouring out some cold water, bathed her face. "Miss Gwilt shan't see I've been crying!" thought Neelie, as she went back to the bedside to take her leave. "I've tired you out, mamma," she said, gently. "Let me go now; and let me come back a little later when you have had some rest."

"Yes," repeated her mother, as mechanically as ever; "a little later when I have had some rest."

Neelie left the room. The minute after the door had closed on her, Mrs. Milroy rang the bell for her nurse. In the face of the narrative she had just heard, in the face of every reasonable estimate of probabilities, she held to her own jealous conclusions as firmly as ever. "Mr. Armadale may believe her, and my daughter may believe her," thought the furious woman. "But I know the major; and she can't deceive *me*!"

The nurse came in. "Prop me up," said Mrs. Milroy. "And give me my desk. I want to write."

"You're excited," replied the nurse. "You're not fit to write."

"Give me the desk," reiterated Mrs. Milroy.

"Anything more?" asked Rachel, repeating her invariable formula as she placed the desk on the bed.

"Yes. Come back in half an hour. I shall want you to take a letter to the great house."

The nurse's sardonic composure deserted her for once. "Mercy on us!" she exclaimed, with an accent of genuine surprise. "What next? You don't mean to say you're going to write —?"

"I am going to write to Mr. Armadale," interposed Mrs. Milroy; "and you are going to take the letter to him, and wait for an answer; and, mind this, not a living soul but our two selves must know of it in the house."

"Why are you writing to Mr. Armadale?" asked Rachel. "And why is nobody to know of it but our two selves?"

"Wait," rejoined Mrs. Milroy, "and you will see."

The nurse's curiosity, being a woman's curiosity, declined to wait.

"I'll help you with my eyes open," she said; "but I won't help you blindfold."

"Oh, if I only had the use of my limbs!" groaned Mrs. Milroy. "You wretch, if I could only do without you!"

"You have the use of your head," retorted the impenetrable nurse. "And you ought to know better than to trust me by halves, at this time of day."

It was brutally put; but it was true – doubly true, after the opening of Miss Gwilt's letter. Mrs. Milroy gave way.

"What do you want to know?" she asked. "Tell me, and leave me."

"I want to know what you are writing to Mr. Armadale about?"

"About Miss Gwilt."

"What has Mr. Armadale to do with you and Miss Gwilt?"

Mrs. Milroy held up the letter that had been returned to her by the authorities at the Post-office.

"Stoop," she said. "Miss Gwilt may be listening at the door. I'll whisper."

The nurse stooped, with her eye on the door. "You know that the postman went with this letter to Kingsdown Crescent?" said Mrs. Milroy. "And you know that he found Mrs. Mandeville gone away, nobody could tell where?"

"Well," whispered Rachel "what next?"

"This, next. When Mr. Armadale gets the letter that I am going to write to him, he will follow the same road as the

postman; and we'll see what happens when he knocks at Mrs. Mandeville's door."

"How do you get him to the door?"

"I tell him to go to Miss Gwilt's reference."

"Is he sweet on Miss Gwilt?"

"Yes."

"Ah!" said the nurse. "I see!"

CHAPTER III

THE BRINK OF DISCOVERY

The morning of the interview between Mrs. Milroy and her daughter at the cottage was a morning of serious reflection for the squire at the great house.

Even Allan's easy-tempered nature had not been proof against the disturbing influences exercised on it by the events of the last three days. Midwinter's abrupt departure had vexed him; and Major Milroy's reception of his inquiries relating to Miss Gwilt weighed unpleasantly on his mind. Since his visit to the cottage, he had felt impatient and ill at ease, for the first time in his life, with everybody who came near him. Impatient with Pedgift Junior, who had called on the previous evening to announce his departure for London, on business, the next day, and to place his services at the disposal of his client; ill at ease with Miss Gwilt, at a secret meeting with her in the park that morning; and ill at ease in his own company, as he now sat moodily smoking in the solitude of his room. "I can't live this sort of life much longer," thought Allan. "If nobody will help me to put the awkward question to Miss Gwilt, I must stumble on some way of putting it for myself."

What way? The answer to that question was as hard to find as ever. Allan tried to stimulate his sluggish invention by walking up and down the room, and was disturbed by the appearance of the footman at the first turn.

"Now then! what is it?" he asked, impatiently.

"A letter, sir; and the person waits for an answer."

Allan looked at the address. It was in a strange handwriting. He opened the letter, and a little note inclosed in it dropped to the ground. The note was directed, still in the strange handwriting, to "Mrs. Mandeville, 18 Kingsdown Crescent, Bayswater. Favored by Mr. Armadale." More and more surprised, Allan turned for information to the signature at the end of the letter. It was "Anne Milroy."

"Anne Milroy?" he repeated. "It must be the major's wife. What can she possibly want with me?" By way of discovering what she wanted, Allan did at last what he might more wisely have done at first. He sat down to read the letter.

[*"Private."*] *"The Cottage, Monday.*

"DEAR SIR — The name at the end of these lines will, I fear, recall to you a very rude return made on my part, some time since, for an act of neighborly kindness on yours. I can only say in excuse that I am a great sufferer, and that, if I was ill-tempered enough, in a moment of irritation under severe pain, to send back your present of fruit, I have regretted doing so ever since. Attribute this letter, if you please, to my desire to make some atonement, and to my wish to be of service to our good friend and landlord, if I possibly can.

"I have been informed of the question which you addressed to my husband, the day before yesterday, on the subject of Miss Gwilt. From all I have heard of you, I am quite sure that your anxiety to know more of this charming person than you know now is an anxiety proceeding from the most honorable motives. Believing this, I feel a woman's interest — incurable invalid as I am — in assisting you. If you are desirous of becoming acquainted with Miss Gwilt's family circumstances without directly appealing to Miss Gwilt herself, it rests with you to make the discovery; and I will tell you how.

"It so happens that, some few days since, I wrote privately to Miss Gwilt's reference on this very subject. I had long observed that my governess was singularly reluctant to speak of her family and her friends; and, without attributing her silence to other than perfectly proper motives, I felt it my duty to my daughter to make some inquiry on the subject. The answer that I have received is satisfactory as far as it goes. My correspondent informs me that Miss Gwilt's story is a very sad one, and that her own conduct throughout has been praiseworthy in the extreme. The circumstances (of a domestic nature, as I gather) are all plainly stated in a collection of letters now in the possession of Miss Gwilt's reference. This lady is perfectly willing to let me see the letters; but not possessing copies of them, and being personally responsible for their security, she is reluctant, if it can be avoided, to trust them to the post; and she begs me to wait until she or I can find some reliable

person who can be employed to transmit the packet from her hands to mine.

“Under these circumstances, it has struck me that you might possibly, with your interest in the matter, be not unwilling to take charge of the papers. If I am wrong in this idea, and if you are not disposed, after what I have told you, to go to the trouble and expense of a journey to London, you have only to burn my letter and inclosure, and to think no more about it. If you decide on becoming my envoy, I gladly provide you with the necessary introduction to Mrs. Mandeville. You have only, on presenting it, to receive the letters in a sealed packet, to send them here on your return to Thorpe Ambrose, and to wait an early communication from me acquainting you with the result.

“In conclusion, I have only to add that I see no impropriety in your taking (if you feel so inclined) the course that I propose to you. Miss Gwilt’s manner of receiving such allusions as I have made to her family circumstances has rendered it unpleasant for me (and would render it quite impossible for you) to seek information in the first instance from herself. I am certainly justified in applying to her reference; and you are certainly not to blame for being the medium of safely transmitting a sealed communication with one lady to another. If I find in that communication family secrets which cannot honorably be mentioned to any third person, I shall, of course, be obliged to keep you waiting until I have first appealed to Miss Gwilt. If I find nothing recorded but what is to her honor, and what is sure to raise her still higher in your estimation, I

an undeniably doing her a service by taking you into my confidence. This is how I look at the matter; but pray don't allow me to influence you.

"In any case, I have one condition to make, which I am sure you will understand to be indispensable. The most innocent actions are liable, in this wicked world, to the worst possible interpretation I must, therefore, request that you will consider this communication as strictly private. I write to you in a confidence which is on no account (until circumstances may, in my opinion, justify the revelation of it) to extend beyond our two selves,

"Believe me, dear sir, truly yours,

"ANNE MILROY."

In this tempting form the unscrupulous ingenuity of the major's wife had set the trap. Without a moment's hesitation, Allan followed his impulses, as usual, and walked straight into it, writing his answer and pursuing his own reflections simultaneously in a highly characteristic state of mental confusion.

"By Jupiter, this is kind of Mrs. Milroy!" ("My dear madam.") "Just the thing I wanted, at the time when I needed it most!" ("I don't know how to express my sense of your kindness, except by saying that I will go to London and fetch the letters with the greatest pleasure.") "She shall have a basket of fruit regularly every day, all through the season." ("I will go at once, dear madam, and be back to-morrow.") "Ah, nothing like the women for helping one when one is in love! This is just what my poor mother would have done in Mrs. Milroy's place." ("On my word of honor as a gentleman, I will take the

utmost care of the letters; and keep the thing strictly private, as you request.") "I would have given five hundred pounds to anybody who would have put me up to the right way to speak to Miss Gwilt; and here is this blessed woman does it for nothing." ("Believe me, my dear madam, gratefully yours, Allan Armadale.")

Having sent his reply out to Mrs. Milroy's messenger, Allan paused in a momentary perplexity. He had an appointment with Miss Gwilt in the park for the next morning. It was absolutely necessary to let her know that he would be unable to keep it. She had forbidden him to write, and he had no chance that day of seeing her alone. In this difficulty, he determined to let the necessary intimation reach her through the medium of a message to the major, announcing his departure for London on business, and asking if he could be of service to any member of the family. Having thus removed the only obstacle to his freedom of action, Allan consulted the time-table, and found, to his disappointment, that there was a good hour to spare before it would be necessary to drive to the railway station. In his existing frame of mind he would infinitely have preferred starting for London in a violent hurry.

When the time came at last, Allan, on passing the steward's office, drummed at the door, and called through it to Mr. Bashwood, "I'm going to town; back to-morrow." There was no answer from within; and the servant, interposing, informed his master that Mr. Bashwood, having no business to attend to that day, had locked up the office, and had left some hours since.

On reaching the station, the first person whom Allan encountered was Pedgift Junior, going to London on the legal business which he had mentioned on the previous evening at the great house. The necessary explanations exchanged, and it was decided that the two should travel in the same carriage. Allan was glad to have a companion; and Pedgift, enchanted as usual to make himself useful to his client, bustled away to get the tickets and see to the luggage. Sauntering to and fro on the platform, until his faithful follower returned, Allan came suddenly upon no less a person than Mr. Bashwood himself, standing back in a corner with the guard of the train, and putting a letter (accompanied, to all appearance, by a fee) privately into the man's hand.

"Halloo!" cried Allan, in his hearty way. "Something important there, Mr. Bashwood, eh?"

If Mr. Bashwood had been caught in the act of committing murder, he could hardly have shown greater alarm than he now testified at Allan's sudden discovery of him. Snatching off his dingy old hat, he bowed bare-headed, in a palsy of nervous trembling from head to foot. "No, sir — no, sir; only a little letter, a little letter, a little letter," said the deputy-steward, taking refuge in reiteration, and bowing himself swiftly backward out of his employer's sight.

Allan turned carelessly on his heel. "I wish I could take to that fellow," he thought, "but I can't; he's such a sneak! What the deuce was there to tremble about? Does he think I want to pry into his secrets?"

Mr. Bashwood's secret on this occasion concerned Allan more nearly than Allan supposed. The letter which he had just

placed in charge of the guard was nothing less than a word of warning addressed to Mrs. Oldershaw, and written by Miss Gwilt.

“If you can hurry your business” (wrote the major’s governess) “do so, and come back to London immediately. Things are going wrong here, and Miss Milroy is at the bottom of the mischief. This morning she insisted on taking up her mother’s breakfast, always on other occasions taken up by the nurse. They had a long confabulation in private; and half an hour later I saw the nurse slip out with a letter, and take the path that leads to the great house. The sending of the letter has been followed by young Armadale’s sudden departure for London — in the face of an appointment which he had with me for tomorrow morning. This looks serious. The girl is evidently bold enough to make a fight of it for the position of Mrs. Armadale of Thorpe Ambrose, and she has found out some way of getting her mother to help her. Don’t suppose I am in the least nervous or discouraged, and don’t do anything till you hear from me again. Only get back to London, for I may have serious need of your assistance in the course of the next day or two.

“I send this letter to town (to save a post) by the midday train, in charge of the guard. As you insist on knowing every step I take at Thorpe Ambrose, I may as well tell you that my messenger (for I can’t go to the station myself) is that curious old creature whom I mentioned to you in my first letter. Ever since that time he has been perpetually hanging about here for a look at me. I am not sure whether I frighten him or fascinate him; perhaps I do both together. All you need care to know is

that I can trust him with my trifling errands, and possibly, as time goes on, with something more. L. G."

Meanwhile the train had started from the Thorpe Ambrose station, and the squire and his traveling companion were on their way to London.

Some men, finding themselves in Allan's company under present circumstances, might have felt curious to know the nature of his business in the metropolis. Young Pedgift's unerring instinct as a man of the world penetrated the secret without the slightest difficulty. "The old story," thought this wary old head, wagging privately on its lusty young shoulders, "There's a woman in the case, as usual. Any other business would have been turned over to me." Perfectly satisfied with this conclusion, Mr. Pedgift the younger proceeded, with an eye to his professional interest, to make himself agreeable to his client in the capacity of volunteer courier. He seized on the whole administrative business of the journey to London, as he had seized on the whole administrative business of the picnic at the Broads. On reaching the terminus, Allan was ready to go to any hotel that might be recommended. His invaluable solicitor straight-way drove him to a hotel at which the Pedgift family had been accustomed to put up for three generations.

"You don't object to vegetables, sir?" said the cheerful Pedgift, as the cab stopped at a hotel in Covent Garden Market. "Very good; you may leave the rest to my grandfather, my father, and me. I don't know which of the three is most beloved and respected in this house. How d'ye do, William? (Our head-waiter, Mr. Armadale.) Is your wife's rheumatism better, and does the little boy get on nicely at school? Your master's out,

is he? Never mind, you'll do. This, William, is Mr. Armadale of Thorpe Ambrose. I have prevailed on Mr. Armadale to try our house. Have you got the bedroom I wrote for? Very good. Let Mr. Armadale have it instead of me (my grandfather's favorite bedroom, sir; No. 57, on the second floor); pray take it; I can sleep anywhere. Will you have the mattress on the top of the feather-bed? You hear, William? Tell Matilda, the mattress on the top of the feather-bed. How is Matilda? Has she got the toothache, as usual? The head-chambermaid, Mr. Armadale, and a most extraordinary woman; she will *not* part with a hollow tooth in her lower jaw. My grandfather says, 'Have it out;' my father says, 'Have it out;' I say, 'Have it out;' and Matilda turns a deaf ear to all three of us. Yes, William, yes; if Mr. Armadale approves, this sitting-room will do. About dinner, sir? Shall we say, in that case, half-past seven? William, half-past seven. Not the least need to order anything, Mr. Armadale. The head-waiter has only to give my compliments to the cook, and the best dinner in London will be sent up, punctual to the minute, as a necessary consequence. Say, Mr. Pedgift Junior, if you please, William; otherwise, sir, we might get my grandfather's dinner or my father's dinner, and they *might* turn out a little too heavy and old-fashioned in their way of feeding for you and me. As to the wine, William. At dinner, *my* Champagne, and the sherry that my father thinks nasty. After dinner, the claret with the blue seal – the wine my innocent grandfather said wasn't worth sixpence a bottle. Ha! ha! poor old boy! You will send up the evening papers and the play-bills, just as usual, and – that will do? I think, William, for the present. An invaluable servant, Mr. Armadale; they're all invaluable ser-

wants in this house. We may not be fashionable here, sir, but by the Lord Harry we are snug! A cab? you would like a cab? Don't stir! I've rung the bell twice – that means, Cab wanted in a hurry. Might I ask, Mr. Armadale, which way your business takes you? Toward Bayswater? Would you mind dropping me in the park? It's a habit of mine when I'm in London to air myself among the aristocracy. Yours truly, sir, has an eye for a fine woman and a fine horse; and when he's in Hyde Park he's quite in his native element." Thus the all-accomplished Pedgift ran on; and by these little arts did he recommend himself to the good opinion of his client.

When the dinner hour united the traveling companions again in their sitting-room at the hotel, a far less acute observer than young Pedgift must have noticed the marked change that appeared in Allan's manner. He looked vexed and puzzled, and sat drumming with his fingers on the dining-table without uttering a word.

"I'm afraid something has happened to annoy you, sir, since we parted company in the Park?" said Pedgift Junior. "Excuse the question; I only ask it in case I can be of any use."

"Something that I never expected has happened," returned Allan; "I don't know what to make of it. I should like to have your opinion," he added, after a little hesitation; "that is to say, if you will excuse my not entering into any particulars?"

"Certainly!" assented young Pedgift. "Sketch it in outline, sir. The merest hint will do; I wasn't born yesterday." ("Oh, these women!" thought the youthful philosopher, in parenthesis.)

"Well," began Allan, "you know what I said when we got to this hotel; I said I had a place to go to in Bayswater" (Pedgift mentally checked off the first point: Case in the suburbs, Bayswater); "and a person – that is to say – no – as I said before, a person to inquire after." (Pedgift checked off the next point: Person in the case. She-person, or he-person? She-person, unquestionably!) "Well, I went to the house, and when I asked for her – I mean the person – she – that is to say, the person – oh, confound it!" cried Allan, "I shall drive myself mad, and you, too, if I try to tell my story in this roundabout way. Here it is in two words. I went to No. 18 Kingsdown Crescent, to see a lady named Mandeville; and, when I asked for her, the servant said Mrs. Mandeville had gone away, without telling anybody where, and without even leaving an address at which letters could be sent to her. There! it's out at last. And what do you think of it now?"

"Tell me first, sir," said the wary Pedgift, "what inquiries you made when you found this lady had vanished?"

"Inquiries!" repeated Allan. "I was utterly staggered; I didn't say anything. What inquiries ought I to have made?"

Pedgift Junior cleared his throat, and crossed his legs in a strictly professional manner.

"I have no wish, Mr. Armadale," he began, "to inquire into your business with Mrs. Mandeville –"

"No," interposed Allan, bluntly; "I hope you won't inquire into that. My business with Mrs. Mandeville must remain a secret."

"But," pursued Pedgift, laying down the law with the forefinger of one hand on the outstretched palm of the other, "I

may, perhaps, be allowed to ask generally whether your business with Mrs. Mandeville is of a nature to interest you in tracing her from Kingsdown Crescent to her present residence?"

"Certainly!" said Allan. "I have a very particular reason for wishing to see her."

"In that case, sir," returned Pedgift Junior, "there were two obvious questions which you ought to have asked, to begin with – namely, on what date Mrs. Mandeville left, and how she left. Having discovered this, you should have ascertained next under what domestic circumstances she went away – whether there was a misunderstanding with anybody; say a difficulty about money matters. Also, whether she went away alone, or with somebody else. Also, whether the house was her own, or whether she only lodged in it. Also, in the latter event – "

"Stop! stop! you're making my head swim," cried Allan. "I don't understand all these ins and outs. I'm not used to this sort of thing."

"I've been used to it myself from my childhood upward, sir," remarked Pedgift. "And if I can be of any assistance, say the word."

"You're very kind," returned Allan. "If you could only help me to find Mrs. Mandeville; and if you wouldn't mind leaving the thing afterward entirely in my hands –?"

"I'll leave it in your hands, sir, with all the pleasure in life," said Pedgift Junior. ("And I'll lay five to one," he added, mentally, "when the time comes, you'll leave it in mine!") "We'll go to Bayswater together, Mr. Armadale, to-morrow morning. In the meantime here's the soup. The case now before the court is, Pleasure versus Business. I don't know what you say, sir; I

say, without a moment's hesitation, Verdict for the plaintiff. Let us gather our rosebuds while we may. Excuse my high spirits, Mr. Armadale. Though buried in the country, I was made for a London life; the very air of the metropolis intoxicates me." With that avowal the irresistible Pedgift placed a chair for his patron, and issued his orders cheerfully to his viceroy, the head-waiter. "Iced punch, William, after the soup. I answer for the punch, Mr. Armadale; it's made after a recipe of my great-uncle's. He kept a tavern, and founded the fortunes of the family. I don't mind telling you the Pedgifts have had a publican among them; there's no false pride about me. 'Worth makes the man (as Pope says) and want of it the fellow; the rest is all but leather and prunella.' I cultivate poetry as well as music, sir, in my leisure hours; in fact, I'm more or less on familiar terms with the whole of the nine Muses. Aha! here's the punch! The memory of my great-uncle, the publican, Mr. Armadale – drunk in solemn silence!"

Allan tried hard to emulate his companion's gayety and good humor, but with very indifferent success. His visit to Kingsdown Crescent recurred ominously again and again to his memory all through the dinner, and all through the public amusements to which he and his legal adviser repaired at a later hour of the evening. When Pedgift Junior put out his candle that night, he shook his wary head, and regretfully apostrophized "the women" for the second time.

By ten o'clock the next morning the indefatigable Pedgift was on the scene of action. To Allan's great relief, he proposed making the necessary inquiries at Kingsdown Crescent in his own person, while his patron waited near at hand, in the cab

which had brought them from the hotel. After a delay of little more than five minutes, he reappeared, in full possession of all attainable particulars. His first proceeding was to request Allan to step out of the cab, and to pay the driver. Next, he politely offered his arm, and led the way round the corner of the crescent, across a square, and into a by-street, which was rendered exceptionally lively by the presence of the local cab-stand. Here he stopped, and asked jocosely whether Mr. Armadale saw his way now, or whether it would be necessary to test his patience by making an explanation.

“See my way?” repeated Allan, in bewilderment. “I see nothing but a cab-stand.”

Pedgift Junior smiled compassionately, and entered on his explanation. It was a lodging-house at Kingsdown Crescent, he begged to state to begin with. He had insisted on seeing the landlady. A very nice person, with all the remains of having been a fine girl about fifty years ago; quite in Pedgift’s style – if he had only been alive at the beginning of the present century – quite in Pedgift’s style. But perhaps Mr. Armadale would prefer hearing about Mrs. Mandeville? Unfortunately, there was nothing to tell. There had been no quarreling, and not a farthing left unpaid: the lodger had gone, and there wasn’t an explanatory circumstance to lay hold of anywhere. It was either Mrs. Mandeville’s way to vanish, or there was something under the rose, quite undiscoverable so far. Pedgift had got the date on which she left, and the time of day at which she left, and the means by which she left. The means might help to trace her. She had gone away in a cab which the servant had fetched from the nearest stand. The stand was now before

their eyes; and the waterman was the first person to apply to – going to the waterman for information being clearly (if Mr. Armadale would excuse the joke) going to the fountain-head. Treating the subject in this airy manner, and telling Allan that he would be back in a moment, Pedgift Junior sauntered down the street, and beckoned the waterman confidentially into the nearest public-house.

In a little while the two re-appeared, the waterman taking Pedgift in succession to the first, third, fourth, and sixth of the cabmen whose vehicles were on the stand. The longest conference was held with the sixth man; and it ended in the sudden approach of the sixth cab to the part of the street where Allan was waiting.

“Get in, sir,” said Pedgift, opening the door; “I’ve found the man. He remembers the lady; and, though he has forgotten the name of the street, he believes he can find the place he drove her to when he once gets back into the neighborhood. I am charmed to inform you, Mr. Armadale, that we are in luck’s way so far. I asked the waterman to show me the regular men on the stand; and it turns out that one of the regular men drove Mrs. Mandeville. The waterman vouches for him; he’s quite an anomaly – a respectable cabman; drives his own horse, and has never been in any trouble. These are the sort of men, sir, who sustain one’s belief in human nature. I’ve had a look at our friend, and I agree with the waterman; I think we can depend on him.”

The investigation required some exercise of patience at the outset. It was not till the cab had traversed the distance between Bayswater and Pimlico that the driver began to slacken

his pace and look about him. After once or twice retracing its course, the vehicle entered a quiet by-street, ending in a dead wall, with a door in it; and stopped at the last house on the left-hand side, the house next to the wall.

"Here it is, gentlemen," said the man, opening the cab door.

Allan and Allan's adviser both got out, and both looked at the house, with the same feeling of instinctive distrust.

Buildings have their physiognomy – especially buildings in great cities – and the face of this house was essentially furtive in its expression. The front windows were all shut, and the front blinds were all drawn down. It looked no larger than the other houses in the street, seen in front; but it ran back deceitfully and gained its greater accommodation by means of its greater depth. It affected to be a shop on the ground-floor; but it exhibited absolutely nothing in the space that intervened between the window and an inner row of red curtains, which hid the interior entirely from view. At one side was the shop door, having more red curtains behind the glazed part of it, and bearing a brass plate on the wooden part of it, inscribed with the name of "Oldershaw." On the other side was the private door, with a bell marked Professional; and another brass plate, indicating a medical occupant on this side of the house, for the name on it was, "Doctor Downward." If ever brick and mortar spoke yet, the brick and mortar here said plainly, "We have got our secrets inside, and we mean to keep them."

"This can't be the place," said Allan; "there must be some mistake."

"You know best, sir," remarked Pedgift Junior, with his sardonic gravity. "You know Mrs. Mandeville's habits."

"I!" exclaimed Allan. "You may be surprised to hear it; but Mrs. Mandeville is a total stranger to me."

"I'm not in the least surprised to hear it, sir; the landlady at Kingsdown Crescent informed me that Mrs. Mandeville was an old woman. Suppose we inquire?" added the impenetrable Pedgift, looking at the red curtains in the shop window with a strong suspicion that Mrs. Mandeville's granddaughter might possibly be behind them.

They tried the shop door first. It was locked. They rang. A lean and yellow young woman, with a tattered French novel in her hand, opened it.

"Good-morning, miss," said Pedgift. "Is Mrs. Mandeville at home?"

The yellow young woman stared at him in astonishment. "No person of that name is known here," she answered, sharply, in a foreign accent.

"Perhaps they know her at the private door?" suggested Pedgift Junior.

"Perhaps they do," said the yellow young woman, and shut the door in his face.

"Rather a quick-tempered young person that, sir," said Pedgift. "I congratulate Mrs. Mandeville on not being acquainted with her." He led the way, as he spoke, to Doctor Downward's side of the premises, and rang the bell.

The door was opened this time by a man in a shabby livery. He, too, stared when Mrs. Mandeville's name was mentioned; and he, too, knew of no such person in the house.

"Very odd," said Pedgift, appealing to Allan.

"What is odd?" asked a softly stepping, softly speaking gentleman in black, suddenly appearing on the threshold of the parlor door.

Pedgift Junior politely explained the circumstances, and begged to know whether he had the pleasure of speaking to Doctor Downward.

The doctor bowed. If the expression may be pardoned, he was one of those carefully constructed physicians in whom the public – especially the female public – implicitly trust. He had the necessary bald head, the necessary double eyeglass, the necessary black clothes, and the necessary blandness of manner, all complete. His voice was soothing, his ways were deliberate, his smile was confidential. What particular branch of his profession Doctor Downward followed was not indicated on his door-plate; but he had utterly mistaken his vocation if he was not a ladies' medical man.

"Are you quite sure there is no mistake about the name?" asked the doctor, with a strong underlying anxiety in his manner. "I have known very serious inconvenience to arise sometimes from mistakes about names. No? There is really no mistake? In that case, gentlemen, I can only repeat what my servant has already told you. Don't apologize, pray. Good-morning." The doctor withdrew as noiselessly as he had appeared; the man in the shabby livery silently opened the door; and Allan and his companion found themselves in the street again.

"Mr. Armadale," said Pedgift, "I don't know how you feel; I feel puzzled."

"That's awkward," returned Allan. "I was just going to ask you what we ought to do next."

"I don't like the look of the place, the look of the shopwoman, or the look of the doctor," pursued the other. "And yet I can't say I think they are deceiving us; I can't say I think they really know Mrs. Mandeville's name."

The impressions of Pedgift Junior seldom misled him; and they had not misled him in this case. The caution which had dictated Mrs. Oldershaw's private removal from Bayswater was the caution which frequently overreaches itself. It had warned her to trust nobody at Pimlico with the secret of the name she had assumed as Miss Gwilt's reference; but it had entirely failed to prepare her for the emergency that had really happened. In a word, Mrs. Oldershaw had provided for everything except for the one unimaginable contingency of an after-inquiry into the character of Miss Gwilt.

"We must do something," said Allan; "it seems useless to stop here."

Nobody had ever yet caught Pedgift Junior at the end of his resources; and Allan failed to catch him at the end of them now. "I quite agree with you, sir," he said; "we must do something. We'll cross-examine the cabman."

The cabman proved to be immovable. Charged with mistaking the place, he pointed to the empty shop window. "I don't know what you may have seen, gentlemen," he remarked; "but there's the only shop window I ever saw with nothing at all inside it. *That* fixed the place in my mind at the time, and I know it again when I see it." Charged with mistaking the person or the day, or the house at which he had taken the person up,

the cabman proved to be still unassailable. The servant who fetched him was marked as a girl well known on the stand. The day was marked as the unluckiest working-day he had had since the first of the year; and the lady was marked as having had her money ready at the right moment (which not one elderly lady in a hundred usually had), and having paid him his fare on demand without disputing it (which not one elderly lady in a hundred usually did). "Take my number, gentlemen," concluded the cabman, "and pay me for my time; and what I've said to you, I'll swear to anywhere."

Pedgift made a note in his pocket-book of the man's number. Having added to it the name of the street, and the names on the two brass plates, he quietly opened the cab door. "We are quite in the dark, thus far," he said. "Suppose we grope our way back to the hotel?"

He spoke and looked more seriously than usual. The mere fact of "Mrs. Mandeville's" having changed her lodging without telling any one where she was going, and without leaving any address at which letters could be forwarded to her – which the jealous malignity of Mrs. Milroy had interpreted as being undeniably suspicious in itself – had produced no great impression on the more impartial judgment of Allan's solicitor. People frequently left their lodgings in a private manner, with perfectly producible reasons for doing so. But the appearance of the place to which the cabman persisted in declaring that he had driven "Mrs. Mandeville" set the character and proceedings of that mysterious lady before Pedgift Junior in a new light. His personal interest in the inquiry suddenly strength-

ened, and he began to feel a curiosity to know the real nature of Allan's business which he had not felt yet.

"Our next move, Mr. Armadale, is not a very easy move to see," he said, as they drove back to the hotel. "Do you think you could put me in possession of any further particulars?"

Allan hesitated; and Pedgift Junior saw that he had advanced a little too far. "I mustn't force it," he thought; "I must give it time, and let it come of its own accord." "In the absence of any other information, sir," he resumed, "what do you say to my making some inquiry about that queer shop, and about those two names on the door-plate? My business in London, when I leave you, is of a professional nature; and I am going into the right quarter for getting information, if it is to be got."

"There can't be any harm, I suppose, in making inquiries," replied Allan.

He, too, spoke more seriously than usual; he, too, was beginning to feel an all-mastering curiosity to know more. Some vague connection, not to be distinctly realized or traced out, began to establish itself in his mind between the difficulty of approaching Miss Gwilt's family circumstances and the difficulty of approaching Miss Gwilt's reference. "I'll get down and walk, and leave you to go on to your business," he said. "I want to consider a little about this, and a walk and a cigar will help me."

"My business will be done, sir, between one and two," said Pedgift, when the cab had been stopped, and Allan had got out. "Shall we meet again at two o'clock, at the hotel?"

Allan nodded, and the cab drove off.

CHAPTER IV ALLAN AT BAY

Two o'clock came; and Pedgift Junior, punctual to his time, came with it. His vivacity of the morning had all sparkled out; he greeted Allan with his customary politeness, but without his customary smile; and, when the headwaiter came in for orders, his dismissal was instantly pronounced in words never yet heard to issue from the lips of Pedgift in that hotel: "Nothing at present."

"You seem to be in low spirits," said Allan. "Can't we get our information? Can nobody tell you anything about the house in Pimlico?"

"Three different people have told me about it, Mr. Armadale, and they have all three said the same thing."

Allan eagerly drew his chair nearer to the place occupied by his traveling companion. His reflections in the interval since they had last seen each other had not tended to compose him. That strange connection, so easy to feel, so hard to trace, between the difficulty of approaching Miss Gwilt's family circumstances and the difficulty of approaching Miss Gwilt's reference, which had already established itself in his thoughts, had by this time stealthily taken a firmer and firmer hold on

his mind. Doubts troubled him which he could neither understand nor express. Curiosity filled him, which he half longed and half dreaded to satisfy.

"I am afraid I must trouble you with a question or two, sir, before I can come to the point," said Pedgift Junior. "I don't want to force myself into your confidence. I only want to see my way, in what looks to me like a very awkward business. Do you mind telling me whether others besides yourself are interested in this inquiry of ours?"

"Other people *are* interested in it," replied Allan. "There's no objection to telling you that."

"Is there any other person who is the object of the inquiry besides Mrs. Mandeville, herself?" pursued Pedgift, winding his way a little deeper into the secret.

"Yes; there is another person," said Allan, answering rather unwillingly.

"Is the person a young woman, Mr. Armadale?"

Allan started. "How do you come to guess that?" he began, then checked himself, when it was too late. "Don't ask me any more questions," he resumed. "I'm a bad hand at defending myself against a sharp fellow like you; and I'm bound in honor toward other people to keep the particulars of this business to myself."

Pedgift Junior had apparently heard enough for his purpose. He drew his chair, in his turn, nearer to Allan. He was evidently anxious and embarrassed; but his professional manner began to show itself again from sheer force of habit.

"I've done with my questions, sir," he said; "and I have something to say now on my side. In my father's absence, per-

haps you may be kindly disposed to consider me as your legal adviser. If you will take my advice, you will not stir another step in this inquiry."

"What do you mean?" interposed Allan.

"It is just possible, Mr. Armadale, that the cabman, positive as he is, may have been mistaken. I strongly recommend you to take it for granted that he *is* mistaken, and to drop it there."

The caution was kindly intended; but it came too late. Allan did what ninety-nine men out of a hundred in his position would have done — he declined to take his lawyer's advice.

"Very well, sir," said Pedgift Junior; "if you will have it, you must have it."

He leaned forward close to Allan's ear, and whispered what he had heard of the house in Pimlico, and of the people who occupied it.

"Don't blame me, Mr. Armadale," he added, when the irrevocable words had been spoken. "I tried to spare you."

Allan suffered the shock, as all great shocks are suffered, in silence. His first impulse would have driven him headlong for refuge to that very view of the cabman's assertion which had just been recommended to him, but for one damning circumstance which placed itself inexorably in his way. Miss Gwilt's marked reluctance to approach the story of her past life rose irrepressibly on his memory, in indirect but horrible confirmation of the evidence which connected Miss Gwilt's reference with the house in Pimlico. One conclusion, and one only — the conclusion which any man must have drawn, hearing what he had just heard, and knowing no more than he knew — forced itself into his mind. A miserable, fallen woman,

who had abandoned herself in her extremity to the help of wretches skilled in criminal concealment, who had stolen her way back to decent society and a reputable employment by means of a false character, and whose position now imposed on her the dreadful necessity of perpetual secrecy and perpetual deceit in relation to her past life – such was the aspect in which the beautiful governess at Thorpe Ambrose now stood revealed to Allan's eyes!

Falsely revealed, or truly revealed? Had she stolen her way back to decent society and a reputable employment by means of a false character? She had. Did her position impose on her the dreadful necessity of perpetual secrecy and perpetual deceit in relation to her past life? It did. Was she some such pitiable victim to the treachery of a man unknown as Allan had supposed? *She was no such pitiable victim.* The conclusion which Allan had drawn – the conclusion literally forced into his mind by the facts before him – was, nevertheless, the conclusion of all others that was furthest even from touching on the truth. The true story of Miss Gwilt's connection with the house in Pimlico and the people who inhabited it – a house rightly described as filled with wicked secrets, and people rightly represented as perpetually in danger of feeling the grasp of the law – was a story which coming events were yet to disclose: a story infinitely less revolting, and yet infinitely more terrible, than Allan or Allan's companion had either of them supposed.

"I tried to spare you, Mr. Armadale," repeated Pedgift. "I was anxious, if I could possibly avoid it, not to distress you."

Allan looked up, and made an effort to control himself. "You have distressed me dreadfully," he said. "You have quite crushed me down. But it is not your fault. I ought to feel you have done me a service; and what I ought to do I will do, when I am my own man again. There is one thing," Allan added, after a moment's painful consideration, "which ought to be understood between us at once. The advice you offered me just now was very kindly meant, and it was the best advice that could be given. I will take it gratefully. We will never talk of this again, if you please; and I beg and entreat you will never speak about it to any other person. Will you promise me that?"

Pedgift gave the promise with very evident sincerity, but without his professional confidence of manner. The distress in Allan's face seemed to daunt him. After a moment of very uncharacteristic hesitation, he considerably quitted the room.

Left by himself, Allan rang for writing materials, and took out of his pocket-book the fatal letter of introduction to "Mrs. Mandeville" which he had received from the major's wife.

A man accustomed to consider consequences and to prepare himself for action by previous thought would, in Allan's present circumstances, have felt some difficulty as to the course which it might now be least embarrassing and least dangerous to pursue. Accustomed to let his impulses direct him on all other occasions, Allan acted on impulse in the serious emergency that now confronted him. Though his attachment to Miss Gwilt was nothing like the deeply rooted feeling which he had himself honestly believed it to be, she had taken no common place in his admiration, and she filled him with no common grief when he thought of her now. His one dominant desire, at

that critical moment in his life, was a man's merciful desire to protect from exposure and ruin the unhappy woman who had lost her place in his estimation, without losing her claim to the forbearance that could spare, and to the compassion that could shield her. "I can't go back to Thorpe Ambrose; I can't trust myself to speak to her, or to see her again. But I can keep her miserable secret; and I will!" With that thought in his heart, Allan set himself to perform the first and foremost duty which now claimed him – the duty of communicating with Mrs. Milroy. If he had possessed a higher mental capacity and a clearer mental view, he might have found the letter no easy one to write. As it was, he calculated no consequences, and felt no difficulty. His instinct warned him to withdraw at once from the position in which he now stood toward the major's wife, and he wrote what his instinct counseled him to write under those circumstances, as rapidly as the pen could travel over the paper:

"Dunn's Hotel, Covent Garden, Tuesday.

"DEAR MADAM – Pray excuse my not returning to Thorpe Ambrose to-day, as I said I would. Unforeseen circumstances oblige me to stop in London. I am sorry to say I have not succeeded in seeing Mrs. Mandeville, for which reason I cannot perform your errand; and I beg, therefore, with many apologies, to return the letter of introduction. I hope you will allow me to conclude by saying that I am very much obliged to you for your kindness, and that I will not venture to trespass on it any further.

"I remain, dear madam, yours truly,

"ALLAN ARMADALE."

In those artless words, still entirely unsuspecting of the character of the woman he had to deal with, Allan put the weapon she wanted into Mrs. Milroy's hands.

The letter and its inclosure once sealed up and addressed, he was free to think of himself and his future. As he sat idly drawing lines with his pen on the blotting-paper, the tears came into his eyes for the first time – tears in which the woman who had deceived him had no share. His heart had gone back to his dead mother. "If she had been alive," he thought, "I might have trusted *her*, and she would have comforted me." It was useless to dwell on it; he dashed away the tears, and turned his thoughts, with the heart-sick resignation that we all know, to living and present things.

He wrote a line to Mr. Bashwood, briefly informing the deputy steward that his absence from Thorpe Ambrose was likely to be prolonged for some little time, and that any further instructions which might be necessary, under those circumstances, would reach him through Mr. Pedgift the elder. This done, and the letters sent to the post, his thoughts were forced back once more on himself. Again the blank future waited before him to be filled up; and again his heart shrank from it to the refuge of the past.

This time other images than the image of his mother filled his mind. The one all-absorbing interest of his earlier days stirred living and eager in him again. He thought of the sea; he thought of his yacht lying idle in the fishing harbor at his west-country home. The old longing got possession of him to hear the wash of the waves; to see the filling of the sails; to feel the vessel that his own hands had helped to build bounding

under him once more. He rose in his impetuous way to call for the time-table, and to start for Somersetshire by the first train, when the dread of the questions which Mr. Brock might ask, the suspicion of the change which Mr. Brock might see in him, drew him back to his chair. "I'll write," he thought, "to have the yacht rigged and refitted, and I'll wait to go to Somersetshire myself till Midwinter can go with me." He sighed as his memory reverted to his absent friend. Never had he felt the void made in his life by Midwinter's departure so painfully as he felt it now, in the dreariest of all social solitudes — the solitude of a stranger in London, left by himself at a hotel.

Before long, Pedgift Junior looked in, with an apology for his intrusion. Allan felt too lonely and too friendless not to welcome his companion's re-appearance gratefully. "I'm going back to Thorpe Ambrose," he said; "I'm going to stay a little while in London. I hope you will be able to stay with me?" To do him justice, Pedgift was touched by the solitary position in which the owner of the great Thorpe Ambrose estate now appeared before him. He had never, in his relations with Allan, so entirely forgotten his business interests as he forgot them now.

"You are quite right, sir, to stop here; London's the place to divert your mind," said Pedgift, cheerfully. "All business is more or less elastic in its nature, Mr. Armadale; I'll spin *my* business out, and keep you company with the greatest pleasure. We are both of us on the right side of thirty, sir; let's enjoy ourselves. What do you say to dining early, and going to the play, and trying the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park to-morrow morning, after breakfast? If we only live like fighting-cocks,

and go in perpetually for public amusements, we shall arrive in no time at the *mens sana in corpore sano* of the ancients. Don't be alarmed at the quotation, sir. I dabble a little in Latin after business hours, and enlarge my sympathies by occasional perusal of the Pagan writers, assisted by a crib. William, dinner at five; and, as it's particularly important to-day, I'll see the cook myself."

The evening passed; the next day passed; Thursday morning came, and brought with it a letter for Allan. The direction was in Mrs. Milroy's handwriting; and the form of address adopted in the letter warned Allan, the moment he opened it, that something had gone wrong.

["Private."]

"The Cottage, Thorpe Ambrose, Wednesday.

"SIR — I have just received your mysterious letter. It has more than surprised, it has really alarmed me. After having made the friendliest advances to you on my side, I find myself suddenly shut out from your confidence in the most unintelligible, and, I must add, the most discourteous manner. It is quite impossible that I can allow the matter to rest where you have left it. The only conclusion I can draw from your letter is that my confidence must have been abused in some way, and that you know a great deal more than you are willing to tell me. Speaking in the interest of my daughter's welfare, I request that you will inform me what the circumstances are which have prevented your seeing Mrs. Mandeville, and which have led to the with-

drawal of the assistance that you unconditionally promised me in your letter of Monday last.

"In my state of health, I cannot involve myself in a lengthened correspondence. I must endeavor to anticipate any objections you may make, and I must say all that I have to say in my present letter. In the event (which I am most unwilling to consider possible) of your declining to accede to the request that I have just addressed to you, I beg to say that I shall consider it my duty to my daughter to have this very unpleasant matter cleared up. If I don't hear from you to my full satisfaction by return of post, I shall be obliged to tell my husband that circumstances have happened which justify us in immediately testing the respectability of Miss Gwilt's reference. And when he asks me for my authority, I will refer him to you.

"Your obedient servant,

ANNE MILROY."

In those terms the major's wife threw off the mask, and left her victim to survey at his leisure the trap in which she had caught him. Allan's belief in Mrs. Milroy's good faith had been so implicitly sincere that her letter simply bewildered him. He saw vaguely that he had been deceived in some way, and that Mrs. Milroy's neighborly interest in him was not what it had looked on the surface; and he saw no more. The threat of appealing to the major – on which, with a woman's ignorance of the natures of men, Mrs. Milroy had relied for producing its effect – was the only part of the letter to which Allan reverted with any satisfaction: it relieved instead of alarming him. "If

there *is* to be a quarrel," he thought, "it will be a comfort, at any rate, to have it out with a man."

Firm in his resolution to shield the unhappy woman whose secret he wrongly believed himself to have surprised, Allan sat down to write his apologies to the major's wife. After setting up three polite declarations, in close marching order, he retired from the field. "He was extremely sorry to have offended Mrs. Milroy. He was innocent of all intention to offend Mrs. Milroy. And he begged to remain Mrs. Milroy's truly." Never had Allan's habitual brevity as a letter-writer done him better service than it did him now. With a little more skillfulness in the use of his pen, he might have given his enemy even a stronger hold on him than the hold she had got already.

The interval day passed, and with the next morning's post Mrs. Milroy's threat came realized in the shape of a letter from her husband. The major wrote less formally than his wife had written, but his questions were mercilessly to the point:

[*"Private."*]

"The Cottage, Thorpe Ambrose, Friday, July 11, 1851.

"DEAR SIR — When you did me the favor of calling here a few days since, you asked a question relating to my governess, Miss Gwilt, which I thought rather a strange one at the time, and which caused, as you may remember, a momentary embarrassment between us.

"This morning the subject of Miss Gwilt has been brought to my notice again in a manner which has caused me the utmost astonishment. In plain words, Mrs. Milroy has informed me that Miss Gwilt has exposed herself to the

suspicion of having deceived us by a false reference. On my expressing the surprise which such an extraordinary statement caused me, and requesting that it might be instantly substantiated, I was still further astonished by being told to apply for all particulars to no less a person than Mr. Armadale. I have vainly requested some further explanation from Mrs. Milroy; she persists in maintaining silence, and in referring me to yourself.

“Under these extraordinary circumstances, I am compelled, in justice to all parties, to ask you certain questions which I will endeavor to put as plainly as possible, and which I am quite ready to believe (from my previous experience of you) that you will answer frankly on your side.

“I beg to inquire, in the first place, whether you admit or deny Mrs. Milroy’s assertion that you have made yourself acquainted with particulars relating either to Miss Gwilt or to Miss Gwilt’s reference, of which I am entirely ignorant? In the second place, if you admit the truth of Mrs. Milroy’s statement, I request to know how you became acquainted with those particulars? Thirdly, and lastly, I beg to ask you what the particulars are?

“If any special justification for putting these questions be needed — which, purely as a matter of courtesy toward yourself, I am willing to admit — I beg to remind you that the most precious charge in my house, the charge of my daughter, is confided to Miss Gwilt; and that Mrs. Milroy’s statement places you, to all appearance, in the position of being competent to tell me whether that charge is properly bestowed or not.

"I have only to add that, as nothing has thus far occurred to justify me in entertaining the slightest suspicion either of my governess or her reference, I shall wait before I make any appeal to Miss Gwilt until I have received your answer — which I shall expect by return of post. Believe me, dear sir, faithfully yours,

"DAVID MILROY."

This transparently straightforward letter at once dissipated the confusion which had thus far existed in Allan's mind. He saw the snare in which he had been caught (though he was still necessarily at a loss to understand why it had been set for him) as he had not seen it yet. Mrs. Milroy had clearly placed him between two alternatives — the alternative of putting himself in the wrong, by declining to answer her husband's questions; or the alternative of meanly sheltering his responsibility behind the responsibility of a woman, by acknowledging to the major's own face that the major's wife had deceived him.

In this difficulty Allan acted as usual, without hesitation. His pledge to Mrs. Milroy to consider their correspondence private still bound him, disgracefully as she had abused it. And his resolution was as immovable as ever to let no earthly consideration tempt him into betraying Miss Gwilt. "I may have behaved like a fool," he thought, "but I won't break my word; and I won't be the means of turning that miserable woman adrift in the world again."

He wrote to the major as artlessly and briefly as he had written to the major's wife. He declared his unwillingness to cause a friend and neighbor any disappointment, if he could

possibly help it. On this occasion he had no other choice. The questions the major asked him were questions which he could not consent to answer. He was not very clever at explaining himself, and he hoped he might be excused for putting it in that way, and saying no more.

Monday's post brought with it Major Milroy's rejoinder, and closed the correspondence.

"The Cottage, Thorpe Ambrose, Sunday.

"SIR— Your refusal to answer my questions, unaccompanied as it is by even the shadow of an excuse for such a proceeding, can be interpreted but in one way. Besides being an implied acknowledgment of the correctness of Mrs. Milroy's statement, it is also an implied reflection on my governess's character. As an act of justice toward a lady who lives under the protection of my roof, and who has given me no reason whatever to distrust her, I shall now show our correspondence to Miss Grwilt; and I shall repeat to her the conversation which I had with Mrs. Milroy on the subject, in Mrs. Milroy's presence.

"One word more respecting the future relations between us, and I have done. My ideas on certain subjects are, I dare say, the ideas of an old-fashioned man. In my time, we had a code of honor by which we regulated our actions. According to that code, if a man made private inquiries into a lady's affairs, without being either her husband, her father, or her brother, he subjected himself to the responsibility of justifying his conduct in the estimation of others; and, if he evaded that responsibility, he abdicated

the position of a gentleman. It is quite possible that this antiquated way of thinking exists no longer; but it is too late for me, at my time of life, to adopt more modern views. I am scrupulously anxious, seeing that we live in a country and a time in which the only court of honor is a police-court, to express myself with the utmost moderation of language upon this the last occasion that I shall have to communicate with you. Allow me, therefore, merely to remark that our ideas of the conduct which is becoming in a gentleman differ seriously; and permit me on this account to request that you will consider yourself for the future as a stranger to my family and to myself.

"Your obedient servant,

"DAVID MILROY."

The Monday morning on which his client received the major's letter was the blackest Monday that had yet been marked in Pedgift's calendar. When Allan's first angry sense of the tone of contempt in which his friend and neighbor pronounced sentence on him had subsided, it left him sunk in a state of depression from which no efforts made by his traveling companion could rouse him for the rest of the day. Reverting naturally, now that his sentence of banishment had been pronounced, to his early intercourse with the cottage, his memory went back to Neelie, more regretfully and more penitently than it had gone back to her yet. "If *she* had shut the door on me, instead of her father," was the bitter reflection with which Allan now reviewed the past, "I shouldn't have had a word to say against it; I should have felt it served me right."

The next day brought another letter – a welcome letter this time, from Mr. Brock. Allan had written to Somersetshire on the subject of refitting the yacht some days since. The letter had found the rector engaged, as he innocently supposed, in protecting his old pupil against the woman whom he had watched in London, and whom he now believed to have followed him back to his own home. Acting under the directions sent to her, Mrs. Oldershaw's house-maid had completed the mystification of Mr. Brock. She had tranquilized all further anxiety on the rector's part by giving him a written undertaking (in the character of Miss Gwilt), engaging never to approach Mr. Armadale, either personally or by letter! Firmly persuaded that he had won the victory at last, poor Mr. Brock answered Allan's note in the highest spirits, expressing some natural surprise at his leaving Thorpe Ambrose, but readily promising that the yacht should be refitted, and offering the hospitality of the rectory in the heartiest manner.

This letter did wonders in raising Allan's spirits. It gave him a new interest to look to, entirely disassociated from his past life in Norfolk. He began to count the days that were still to pass before the return of his absent friend. It was then Tuesday. If Midwinter came back from his walking trip, as he had engaged to come back, in a fortnight, Saturday would find him at Thorpe Ambrose. A note sent to meet the traveler might bring him to London the same night; and, if all went well, before another week was over they might be afloat together in the yacht.

The next day passed, to Allan's relief, without bringing any letters. The spirits of Pedgift rose sympathetically with the spirits of his client. Toward dinner time he reverted to the *mens*

sana in corpore sano of the ancients, and issued his orders to the head-waiter more royally than ever.

Thursday came, and brought the fatal postman with more news from Norfolk. A letter-writer now stepped on the scene who had not appeared there yet; and the total overthrow of all Allan's plans for a visit to Somersetshire was accomplished on the spot.

Pedgift Junior happened that morning to be the first at the breakfast table. When Allan came in, he relapsed into his professional manner, and offered a letter to his patron with a bow performed in dreary silence.

"For me?" inquired Allan, shrinking instinctively from a new correspondent.

"For you, sir – from my father," replied Pedgift, "inclosed in one to myself. Perhaps you will allow me to suggest, by way of preparing you for – for something a little unpleasant – that we shall want a particularly good dinner to-day; and (if they're not performing any modern German music to-night) I think we should do well to finish the evening melodiously at the Opera."

"Something wrong at Thorpe Ambrose?" asked Allen.

"Yes, Mr. Armadale; something wrong at Thorpe Ambrose." Allan sat down resignedly, and opened the letter.

["*Private and Confidential.*"]

"*High Street Thorpe Ambrose, 17th July, 1851.*

"DEAR SIR – *I cannot reconcile it with my sense of duty to your interests to leave you any longer in ignorance of reports current in this town and its neighborhood, which, I regret to say, are reports affecting yourself.*

"The first intimation of anything unpleasant reached me on Monday last. It was widely rumored in the town that something had gone wrong at Major Milroy's with the new governess, and that Mr. Armadale was mixed up in it. I paid no heed to this, believing it to be one of the many trumpery pieces of scandal perpetually set going here, and as necessary as the air they breathe to the comfort of the inhabitants of this highly respectable place.

"Tuesday, however, put the matter in a new light. The most interesting particulars were circulated on the highest authority. On Wednesday, the gentry in the neighborhood took the matter up, and universally sanctioned the view adopted by the town. To-day the public feeling has reached its climax, and I find myself under the necessity of making you acquainted with what has happened.

"To begin at the beginning. It is asserted that a correspondence took place last week between Major Milroy and yourself; in which you cast a very serious suspicion on Miss Gwilt's respectability, without defining your accusations and without (on being applied to) producing your proofs. Upon this, the major appears to have felt it his duty (while assuring his governess of his own firm belief in her respectability) to inform her of what had happened, in order that she might have no future reason to complain of his having had any concealments from her in a matter affecting her character. Very magnanimous on the major's part; but you will see directly that Miss Gwilt was more magnanimous still. After expressing her thanks in a most becoming manner, she requested permission to withdraw herself from Major Milroy's service.

“Various reports are in circulation as to the governess’s reason for taking this step.

“The authorized version (as sanctioned by the resident gentry) represents Miss Gwilt to have said that she could not condescend — in justice to herself, and in justice to her highly respectable reference — to defend her reputation against undefined imputations cast on it by a comparative stranger. At the same time it was impossible for her to pursue such a course of conduct as this, unless she possessed a freedom of action which was quite incompatible with her continuing to occupy the dependent position of a governess. For that reason she felt it incumbent on her to leave her situation. But, while doing this, she was equally determined not to lead to any misinterpretation of her motives by leaving the neighborhood. No matter at what inconvenience to herself, she would remain long enough at Thorpe Ambrose to await any more definitely expressed imputations that might be made on her character, and to repel them publicly the instant they assumed a tangible form.

“Such is the position which this high-minded lady has taken up, with an excellent effect on the public mind in these parts. It is clearly her interest, for some reason, to leave her situation, without leaving the neighborhood. On Monday last she established herself in a cheap lodging on the outskirts of the town. And on the same day she probably wrote to her reference, for yesterday there came a letter from that lady to Major Milroy, full of virtuous indignation, and courting the fullest inquiry. The letter has been shown publicly, and has immensely strengthened Miss Gwilt’s posi-

tion. She is now considered to be quite a heroine. The Thorpe Ambrose Mercury has got a leading article about her, comparing her to Joan of Arc. It is considered probable that she will be referred to in the sermon next Sunday. We reckon five strong-minded single ladies in this neighborhood — and all five have called on her. A testimonial was suggested; but it has been given up at Miss Gwilt's own request, and a general movement is now on foot to get her employment as a teacher of music. Lastly, I have had the honor of a visit from the lady herself, in her capacity of martyr, to tell me, in the sweetest manner, that she doesn't blame Mr. Armadale, and that she considers him to be an innocent instrument in the hands of other and more designing people. I was carefully on my guard with her; for I don't altogether believe in Miss Gwilt, and I have my lawyer's suspicions of the motive that is at the bottom of her present proceedings.

"I have written thus far, my dear sir, with little hesitation or embarrassment. But there is unfortunately a serious side to this business as well as a ridiculous side; and I must unwillingly come to it before I close my letter.

"It is, I think, quite impossible that you can permit yourself to be spoken of as you are spoken of now, without stirring personally in the matter. You have unluckily made many enemies here, and foremost among them is my colleague, Mr. Darch. He has been showing everywhere a somewhat rashly expressed letter you wrote to him on the subject of letting the cottage to Major Milroy instead of to himself, and it has helped to exasperate the feeling against you. It is roundly stated in so many words that you have

been prying into Miss Gwilt's family affairs, with the most dishonorable motives; that you have tried, for a profligate purpose of your own, to damage her reputation, and to deprive her of the protection of Major Milroy's roof; and that, after having been asked to substantiate by proof the suspicions that you have cast on the reputation of a defenseless woman, you have maintained a silence which condemns you in the estimation of all honorable men.

"I hope it is quite unnecessary for me to say that I don't attach the smallest particle of credit to these infamous reports. But they are too widely spread and too widely believed to be treated with contempt. I strongly urge you to return at once to this place, and to take the necessary measures for defending your character, in concert with me, as your legal adviser. I have formed, since my interview with Miss Gwilt, a very strong opinion of my own on the subject of that lady which it is not necessary to commit to paper. Suffice it to say here that I shall have a means to propose to you for silencing the slanderous tongues of your neighbors, on the success of which I stake my professional reputation, if you will only back me by your presence and authority.

"It may, perhaps, help to show you the necessity there is for your return, if I mention one other assertion respecting yourself, which is in everybody's mouth. Your absence is, I regret to tell you, attributed to the meanest of all motives. It is said that you are remaining in London because you are afraid to show your face at Thorpe Ambrose.

"Believe me, dear sir, your faithful servant,

"A. PEDGIFT, Sen."

Allan was of an age to feel the sting contained in the last sentence of his lawyer's letter. He started to his feet in a paroxysm of indignation, which revealed his character to Pedgift Junior in an entirely new light.

"Where's the time-table?" cried Allan. "I must go back to Thorpe Ambrose by the next train! If it doesn't start directly, I'll have a special engine. I must and will go back instantly, and I don't care two straws for the expense!"

"Suppose we telegraph to my father, sir?" suggested the judicious Pedgift. "It's the quickest way of expressing your feelings, and the cheapest."

"So it is," said Allan. "Thank you for reminding me of it. Telegraph to them! Tell your father to give every man in Thorpe Ambrose the lie direct, in my name. Put it in capital letters, Pedgift – put it in capital letters!"

Pedgift smiled and shook his head. If he was acquainted with no other variety of human nature, he thoroughly knew the variety that exists in country towns.

"It won't have the least effect on them, Mr. Armadale," he remarked quietly. "They'll only go on lying harder than ever. If you want to upset the whole town, one line will do it. With five shillings' worth of human labor and electric fluid, sir (I dabble a little in science after business hours), we'll explode a bombshell in Thorpe Ambrose!" He produced the bombshell on a slip of paper as he spoke: "A. Pedgift, Junior, to A. Pedgift, Senior. – Spread it all over the place that Mr. Armadale is coming down by the next train."

"More words!" suggested Allan, looking over his shoulder. "Make it stronger."

"Leave my father to make it stronger, sir," returned the wary Pedgift. "My father is on the spot, and his command of language is something quite extraordinary." He rang the bell, and dispatched the telegram.

Now that something had been done, Allan subsided gradually into a state of composure. He looked back again at Mr. Pedgift's letter, and then handed it to Mr. Pedgift's son.

"Can you guess your father's plan for setting me right in the neighborhood?" he asked.

Pedgift the younger shook his wise head. "His plan appears to be connected in some way, sir, with his opinion of Miss Gwilt."

"I wonder what he thinks of her?" said Allan.

"I shouldn't be surprised, Mr. Armadale," returned Pedgift Junior, "if his opinion staggers you a little, when you come to hear it. My father has had a large legal experience of the shady side of the sex, and he learned his profession at the Old Bailey."

Allan made no further inquiries. He seemed to shrink from pursuing the subject, after having started it himself. "Let's be doing something to kill the time," he said. "Let's pack up and pay the bill."

They packed up and paid the bill. The hour came, and the train left for Norfolk at last.

While the travelers were on their way back, a somewhat longer telegraphic message than Allan's was flashing its way past them along the wires, in the reverse direction — from Thorpe Ambrose to London. The message was in cipher, and, the signs being interpreted, it ran thus: "From Lydia Gwilt to

Maria Oldershaw. — Good news! He is coming back. I mean to have an interview with him. Everything looks well. Now I have left the cottage, I have no women's prying eyes to dread, and I can come and go as I please. Mr. Midwinter is luckily out of the way. I don't despair of becoming Mrs. Armadale yet. Whatever happens, depend on my keeping away from London until I am certain of not taking any spies after me to your place. I am in no hurry to leave Thorpe Ambrose. I mean to be even with Miss Milroy first."

Shortly after that message was received in London, Allan was back again in his own house.

It was evening — Pedgift Junior had just left him — and Pedgift Senior was expected to call on business in half an hour's time.

CHAPTER V PEDGIFT'S REMEDY

After waiting to hold a preliminary consultation with his son, Mr. Pedgift the elder set forth alone for his interview with Allan at the great house.

Allowing for the difference in their ages, the son was, in this instance, so accurately the reflection of the father, that an acquaintance with either of the two Pedgifts was almost equivalent to an acquaintance with both. Add some little height and size to the figure of Pedgift Junior, give more breadth and boldness to his humor, and some additional solidity and composure to his confidence in himself, and the presence and character of Pedgift Senior stood, for all general purposes, revealed before you.

The lawyer's conveyance to Thorpe Ambrose was his own smart gig, drawn by his famous fast-trotting mare. It was his habit to drive himself; and it was one among the trifling external peculiarities in which he and his son differed a little, to affect something of the sporting character in his dress. The drab trousers of Pedgift the elder fitted close to his legs; his boots, in dry weather and wet alike, were equally thick in the sole; his coat pockets overlapped his hips, and his favorite summer cra-

vat was of light spotted muslin, tied in the neatest and smallest of bows. He used tobacco like his son, but in a different form. While the younger man smoked, the elder took snuff copiously; and it was noticed among his intimates that he always held his "pinch" in a state of suspense between his box and his nose when he was going to clinch a good bargain or to say a good thing. The art of diplomacy enters largely into the practice of all successful men in the lower branch of the law. Mr. Pedgift's form of diplomatic practice had been the same throughout his life, on every occasion when he found his arts of persuasion required at an interview with another man. He invariably kept his strongest argument, or his boldest proposal, to the last, and invariably remembered it at the door (after previously taking his leave), as if it was a purely accidental consideration which had that instant occurred to him. Jocular friends, acquainted by previous experience with this form of proceeding, had given it the name of "Pedgift's postscript." There were few people in Thorpe Ambrose who did not know what it meant when the lawyer suddenly checked his exit at the opened door; came back softly to his chair, with his pinch of snuff suspended between his box and his nose; said, "By-the-by, there's a point occurs to me;" and settled the question off-hand, after having given it up in despair not a minute before.

This was the man whom the march of events at Thorpe Ambrose had now thrust capriciously into a foremost place. This was the one friend at hand to whom Allan in his social isolation could turn for counsel in the hour of need.

"Good-evening, Mr. Armadale. Many thanks for your prompt attention to my very disagreeable letter," said Pedgift

Senior, opening the conversation cheerfully the moment he entered his client's house. "I hope you understand, sir, that I had really no choice under the circumstances but to write as I did?"

"I have very few friends, Mr. Pedgift," returned Allan, simply. "And I am sure you are one of the few."

"Much obliged, Mr. Armadale. I have always tried to deserve your good opinion, and I mean, if I can, to deserve it now. You found yourself comfortable, I hope, sir, at the hotel in London? We call it Our hotel. Some rare old wine in the cellar, which I should have introduced to your notice if I had had the honor of being with you. My son unfortunately knows nothing about wine."

Allan felt his false position in the neighborhood far too acutely to be capable of talking of anything but the main business of the evening. His lawyer's politely roundabout method of approaching the painful subject to be discussed between them rather irritated than composed him. He came at once to the point, in his own bluntly straightforward way.

"The hotel was very comfortable, Mr. Pedgift, and your son was very kind to me. But we are not in London now; and I want to talk to you about how I am to meet the lies that are being told of me in this place. Only point me out any one man," cried Allan, with a rising voice and a mounting color — "any one man who says I am afraid to show my face in the neighborhood, and I'll horsewhip him publicly before another day is over his head!"

Pedgift Senior helped himself to a pinch of snuff, and held it calmly in suspense midway between his box and his nose.

"You can horsewhip a man, sir; but you can't horsewhip a neighborhood," said the lawyer, in his politely epigrammatic manner. "We will fight our battle, if you please, without borrowing our weapons of the coachman yet a while, at any rate."

"But how are we to begin?" asked Allan, impatiently. "How am I to contradict the infamous things they say of me?"

"There are two ways of stepping out of your present awkward position, sir — a short way, and a long way," replied Pedgift Senior. "The short way (which is always the best) has occurred to me since I have heard of your proceedings in London from my son. I understand that you permitted him, after you received my letter, to take me into your confidence. I have drawn various conclusions from what he has told me, which I may find it necessary to trouble you with presently. In the meantime I should be glad to know under what circumstances you went to London to make these unfortunate inquiries about Miss Gwilt? Was it your own notion to pay that visit to Mrs. Mandeville? or were you acting under the influence of some other person?"

Allan hesitated. "I can't honestly tell you it was my own notion," he replied, and said no more.

"I thought as much!" remarked Pedgift Senior, in high triumph. "The short way out of our present difficulty, Mr. Armadale, lies straight through that other person, under whose influence you acted. That other person must be presented forthwith to public notice, and must stand in that other person's proper place. The name, if you please, sir, to begin with — we'll come to the circumstances directly."

"I am sorry to say, Mr. Pedgift, that we must try the longest way, if you have no objection," replied Allan, quietly. "The short way happens to be a way I can't take on this occasion."

The men who rise in the law are the men who decline to take No for an answer. Mr. Pedgift the elder had risen in the law; and Mr. Pedgift the elder now declined to take No for an answer. But all pertinacity – even professional pertinacity included – sooner or later finds its limits; and the lawyer, doubly fortified as he was by long experience and copious pinches of snuff, found his limits at the very outset of the interview. It was impossible that Allan could respect the confidence which Mrs. Milroy had treacherously affected to place in him. But he had an honest man's regard for his own pledged word – the regard which looks straightforward at the fact, and which never glances sidelong at the circumstances – and the utmost persistency of Pedgift Senior failed to move him a hairbreadth from the position which he had taken up. "No" is the strongest word in the English language, in the mouth of any man who has the courage to repeat it often enough, and Allan had the courage to repeat it often enough on this occasion.

"Very good, sir," said the lawyer, accepting his defeat without the slightest loss of temper. "The choice rests with you, and you have chosen. We will go the long way. It starts (allow me to inform you) from my office; and it leads (as I strongly suspect) through a very miry road to – Miss Gwilt."

Allan looked at his legal adviser in speechless astonishment.

"If you won't expose the person who is responsible in the first instance, sir, for the inquiries to which you unfortunately

lent yourself," proceeded Mr. Pedgift the elder, "the only other alternative, in your present position, is to justify the inquiries themselves."

"And how is that to be done?" inquired Allan.

"By proving to the whole neighborhood, Mr. Armadale, what I firmly believe to be the truth – that the pet object of the public protection is an adventuress of the worst class; an undeniably worthless and dangerous woman. In plainer English still, sir, by employing time enough and money enough to discover the truth about Miss Gwilt."

Before Allan could say a word in answer, there was an interruption at the door. After the usual preliminary knock, one of the servants came in.

"I told you I was not to be interrupted," said Allan, irritably. "Good heavens! am I never to have done with them? Another letter?"

"Yes, sir," said the man, holding it out. "And," he added, speaking words of evil omen in his master's ears, "the person waits for an answer."

Allan looked at the address of the letter with a natural expectation of encountering the handwriting of the major's wife. The anticipation was not realized. His correspondent was plainly a lady, but the lady was not Mrs. Milroy.

"Who can it be?" he said, looking mechanically at Pedgift Senior as he opened the envelope.

Pedgift Senior gently tapped his snuff-box, and said, without a moment's hesitation, "Miss Gwilt."

Allan opened the letter. The first two words in it were the echo of the two words the lawyer had just pronounced. It was Miss Gwilt!

Once more, Allan looked at his legal adviser in speechless astonishment.

"I have known a good many of them in my time, sir," explained Pedgift Senior, with a modesty equally rare and becoming in a man of his age. "Not as handsome as Miss Gwilt, I admit. But quite as bad, I dare say. Read your letter, Mr. Armadale — read your letter."

Allan read these lines:

"Miss Gwilt presents her compliments to Mr. Armadale and begs to know if it will be convenient to him to favor her with an interview, either this evening or to-morrow morning. Miss Gwilt offers no apology for making her present request. She believes Mr. Armadale will grant it as an act of justice toward a friendless woman whom he has been innocently the means of injuring, and who is earnestly desirous to set herself right in his estimation."

Allan handed the letter to his lawyer in silent perplexity and distress.

The face of Mr. Pedgift the elder expressed but one feeling when he had read the letter in his turn and had handed it back — a feeling of profound admiration. "What a lawyer she would have made," he exclaimed, fervently, "if she had only been a man!"

"I can't treat this as lightly as you do, Mr. Pedgift," said Allan. "It's dreadfully distressing to me. I was so fond of her," he added, in a lower tone — "I was so fond of her once."

Mr. Pedgift Senior suddenly became serious on his side.

"Do you mean to say, sir, that you actually contemplate seeing Miss Gwilt?" he asked, with an expression of genuine dismay.

"I can't treat her cruelly," returned Allan. "I have been the means of injuring her – without intending it, God knows! I can't treat her cruelly after that!"

"Mr. Armadale," said the lawyer, "you did me the honor, a little while since, to say that you considered me your friend. May I presume on that position to ask you a question or two, before you go straight to your own ruin?"

"Any questions you like," said Allan, looking back at the letter – the only letter he had ever received from Miss Gwilt.

"You have had one trap set for you already, sir, and you have fallen into it. Do you want to fall into another?"

"You know the answer to that question, Mr. Pedgift, as well as I do."

"I'll try again, Mr. Armadale; we lawyers are not easily discouraged. Do you think that any statement Miss Gwilt might make to you, if you do see her, would be a statement to be relied on, after what you and my son discovered in London?"

"She might explain what we discovered in London," suggested Allan, still looking at the writing, and thinking of the hand that had traced it.

"*Might* explain it? My dear sir, she is quite certain to explain it! I will do her justice: I believe she would make out a case without a single flaw in it from beginning to end."

That last answer forced Allan's attention away from the letter. The lawyer's pitiless common sense showed him no mercy.

"If you see that woman again, sir," proceeded Pedgift Senior, "you will commit the rashest act of folly I ever heard of in all my experience. She can have but one object in coming here – to practice on your weakness for her. Nobody can say into what false step she may not lead you, if you once give her the opportunity. You admit yourself that you have been fond of her; your attentions to her have been the subject of general remark; if you haven't actually offered her the chance of becoming Mrs. Armadale, you have done the next thing to it; and knowing all this, you propose to see her, and to let her work on you with her devilish beauty and her devilish cleverness, in the character of your interesting victim! You, who are one of the best matches in England! You, who are the natural prey of all the hungry single women in the community! I never heard the like of it; I never, in all my professional experience, heard the like of it! If you must positively put yourself in a dangerous position, Mr. Armadale," concluded Pedgift the elder, with the everlasting pinch of snuff held in suspense between his box and his nose, "there's a wild-beast show coming to our town next week. Let in the tigress, sir; don't let in Miss Gwilt!"

For the third time Allan looked at his lawyer. And for the third time his lawyer looked back at him quite unabashed.

"You seem to have a very bad opinion of Miss Gwilt," said Allan.

"The worst possible opinion, Mr. Armadale," retorted Pedgift Senior, coolly. "We will return to that when we have sent

the lady's messenger about his business. Will you take my advice? Will you decline to see her?"

"I would willingly decline — it would be so dreadfully distressing to both of us," said Allan. "I would willingly decline, if I only knew how."

"Bless my soul, Mr. Armadale, it's easy enough! Don't commit *you* yourself in writing. Send out to the messenger, and say there's no answer."

The short course thus suggested was a course which Allan positively declined to take. "It's treating her brutally," he said; "I can't and won't do it."

Once more the pertinacity of Pedgift the elder found its limits, and once more that wise man yielded gracefully to a compromise. On receiving his client's promise not to see Miss Gwilt, he consented to Allan's committing himself in writing under his lawyer's dictation. The letter thus produced was modeled in Allan's own style; it began and ended in one sentence. "Mr. Armadale presents his compliments to Miss Gwilt, and regrets that he cannot have the pleasure of seeing her at Thorpe Ambrose." Allan had pleaded hard for a second sentence, explaining that he only declined Miss Gwilt's request from a conviction that an interview would be needlessly distressing on both sides. But his legal adviser firmly rejected the proposed addition to the letter. "When you say No to a woman, sir," remarked Pedgift Senior, "always say it in one word. If you give her your reasons, she invariably believes that you mean Yes."

Producing that little gem of wisdom from the rich mine of his professional experience, Mr. Pedgift the elder sent out

the answer to Miss Gwilt's messenger, and recommended the servant to "see the fellow, whoever he was, well clear of the house."

"Now, sir," said the lawyer, "we will come back, if you like, to my opinion of Miss Gwilt. It doesn't at all agree with yours, I'm afraid. You think her an object of pity – quite natural at your age. I think her an object for the inside of a prison – quite natural at mine. You shall hear the grounds on which I have formed my opinion directly. Let me show you that I am in earnest by putting the opinion itself, in the first place, to a practical test. Do you think Miss Gwilt is likely to persist in paying you a visit, Mr. Armadale, after the answer you have just sent to her?"

"Quite impossible!" cried Allan, warmly. "Miss Gwilt is a lady; after the letter I have sent to her, she will never come near me again."

"There we join issue, sir," cried Pedgift Senior. "I say she will snap her fingers at your letter (which was one of the reasons why I objected to your writing it). I say, she is in all probability waiting her messenger's return, in or near your grounds at this moment. I say, she will try to force her way in here, before four-and-twenty hours more are over your head. Egad, sir!" cried Mr. Pedgift, looking at his watch, "it's only seven o'clock now. She's bold enough and clever enough to catch you unawares this very evening. Permit me to ring for the servant – permit me to request that you will give him orders immediately to say you are not at home. You needn't hesitate, Mr. Armadale! If you're right about Miss Gwilt, it's a mere formality. If I'm right,

it's a wise precaution. Back your opinion, sir," said Mr. Pedgift, ringing the bell; "I back mine!"

Allan was sufficiently nettled when the bell rang to feel ready to give the order. But when the servant came in, past remembrances got the better of him, and the words stuck in his throat. "You give the order," he said to Mr. Pedgift, and walked away abruptly to the window. "You're a good fellow!" thought the old lawyer, looking after him, and penetrating his motive on the instant. "The claws of that she-devil shan't scratch you if I can help it."

The servant waited inexorably for his orders.

"If Miss Gwilt calls here, either this evening, or at any other time," said Pedgift Senior, "Mr. Armadale is not at home. Wait! If she asks when Mr. Armadale will be back, you don't know. Wait! If she proposes coming in and sitting down, you have a general order that nobody is to come in and sit down unless they have a previous appointment with Mr. Armadale. Come!" cried old Pedgift, rubbing his hands cheerfully when the servant had left the room, "I've stopped her out now, at any rate! The orders are all given, Mr. Armadale. We may go on with our conversation."

Allan came back from the window. "The conversation is not a very pleasant one," he said. "No offense to you, but I wish it was over."

"We will get it over as soon as possible, sir," said Pedgift Senior, still persisting, as only lawyers and women *can* persist, in forcing his way little by little nearer and nearer to his own object. "Let us go back, if you please, to the practical suggestion which I offered to you when the servant came in with Miss

Gwilt's note. There is, I repeat, only one way left for you, Mr. Armadale, out of your present awkward position. You must pursue your inquiries about this woman to an end – on the chance (which I consider next to a certainty) that the end will justify you in the estimation of the neighborhood.”

“I wish to God I had never made any inquiries at all!” said Allan. “Nothing will induce me, Mr. Pedgift, to make any more.”

“Why?” asked the lawyer.

“Can you ask me why,” retorted Allan, hotly, “after your son has told you what we found out in London? Even if I had less cause to be – to be sorry for Miss Gwilt than I have; even if it was some other woman, do you think I would inquire any further into the secret of a poor betrayed creature – much less expose it to the neighborhood? I should think myself as great a scoundrel as the man who has cast her out helpless on the world, if I did anything of the kind. I wonder you can ask me the question – upon my soul, I wonder you can ask me the question!”

“Give me your hand, Mr. Armadale!” cried Pedgift Senior, warmly; “I honor you for being so angry with me. The neighborhood may say what it pleases; you’re a gentleman, sir, in the best sense of the word. Now,” pursued the lawyer, dropping Allan’s hand, and lapsing back instantly from sentiment to business, “just hear what I have got to say in my own defense. Suppose Miss Gwilt’s real position happens to be nothing like what you are generously determined to believe it to be?”

“We have no reason to suppose that,” said Allan, resolutely.

"Such is your opinion, sir," persisted Pedgift. "Mine, founded on what is publicly known of Miss Gwilt's proceedings here, and on what I have seen of Miss Gwilt herself, is that she is as far as I am from being the sentimental victim you are inclined to make her out. Gently, Mr. Armadale! remember that I have put my opinion to a practical test, and wait to condemn it off-hand until events have justified you. Let me put my points, sir – make allowances for me as a lawyer – and let me put my points. You and my son are young men; and I don't deny that the circumstances, on the surface, appear to justify the interpretation which, as young men, you have placed on them. I am an old man – I know that circumstances are not always to be taken as they appear on the surface – and I possess the great advantage, in the present case, of having had years of professional experience among some of the wickedest women who ever walked this earth."

Allan opened his lips to protest, and checked himself, in despair of producing the slightest effect. Pedgift Senior bowed in polite acknowledgment of his client's self-restraint, and took instant advantage of it to go on.

"All Miss Gwilt's proceedings," he resumed, "since your unfortunate correspondence with the major show me that she is an old hand at deceit. The moment she is threatened with exposure – exposure of some kind, there can be no doubt, after what you discovered in London – she turns your honorable silence to the best possible account, and leaves the major's service in the character of a martyr. Once out of the house, what does she do next? She boldly stops in the neighborhood, and serves three excellent purposes by doing so. In the first place,

she shows everybody that she is not afraid of facing another attack on her reputation. In the second place, she is close at hand to twist you round her little finger, and to become Mrs. Armadale in spite of circumstances, if you (and I) allow her the opportunity. In the third place, if you (and I) are wise enough to distrust her, she is equally wise on her side, and doesn't give us the first great chance of following her to London, and associating her with her accomplices. Is this the conduct of an unhappy woman who has lost her character in a moment of weakness, and who has been driven unwillingly into a deception to get it back again?"

"You put it cleverly," said Allan, answering with marked reluctance; "I can't deny that you put it cleverly."

"Your own common sense, Mr. Armadale, is beginning to tell you that I put it justly," said Pedgift Senior. "I don't presume to say yet what this woman's connection may be with those people at Pimlico. All I assert is that it is not the connection you suppose. Having stated the facts so far, I have only to add my own personal impression of Miss Gwilt. I won't shock you, if I can help it; I'll try if I can't put it cleverly again. She came to my office (as I told you in my letter), no doubt to make friends with your lawyer, if she could; she came to tell me, in the most forgiving and Christian manner, that she didn't blame *you*."

"Do you ever believe in anybody, Mr. Pedgift?" interposed Allan.

"Sometimes, Mr. Armadale," returned Pedgift the elder, as unabashed as ever. "I believe as often as a lawyer can. To proceed, sir. When I was in the criminal branch of practice, it fell to my lot to take instructions for the defense of women com-

mitted for trial from the women's own lips. Whatever other difference there might be among them, I got, in time, to notice, among those who were particularly wicked and unquestionably guilty, one point in which they all resembled each other. Tall and short, old and young, handsome and ugly, they all had a secret self-possession that nothing could shake. On the surface they were as different as possible. Some of them were in a state of indignation; some of them were drowned in tears; some of them were full of pious confidence; and some of them were resolved to commit suicide before the night was out. But only put your finger suddenly on the weak point in the story told by any one of them, and there was an end of her rage, or her tears, or her piety, or her despair; and out came the genuine woman, in full possession of all her resources with a neat little lie that exactly suited the circumstances of the case. Miss Gwilt was in tears, sir — becoming tears that didn't make her nose red — and I put my finger suddenly on the weak point in *her* story. Down dropped her pathetic pocket-handkerchief from her beautiful blue eyes, and out came the genuine woman with the neat little lie that exactly suited the circumstances! I felt twenty years younger, Mr. Armadale, on the spot. I declare I thought I was in Newgate again, with my note-book in my hand, taking my instructions for the defense!"

"The next thing you'll say, Mr. Pedgift," cried Allan, angrily, "is that Miss Gwilt has been in prison!"

Pedgift Senior calmly rapped his snuff-box, and had his answer ready at a moment's notice.

"She may have richly deserved to see the inside of a prison, Mr. Armadale; but, in the age we live in, that is one excellent

reason for her never having been near any place of the kind. A prison, in the present tender state of public feeling, for a charming woman like Miss Gwilt! My dear sir, if she had attempted to murder you or me, and if an inhuman judge and jury had decided on sending her to a prison, the first object of modern society would be to prevent her going into it; and, if that couldn't be done, the next object would be to let her out again as soon as possible. Read your newspaper, Mr. Armadale, and you'll find we live in piping times for the black sheep of the community – if they are only black enough. I insist on asserting, sir, that we have got one of the blackest of the lot to deal with in this case. I insist on asserting that you have had the rare luck, in these unfortunate inquiries, to pitch on a woman who happens to be a fit object for inquiry, in the interests of the public protection. Differ with me as strongly as you please, but don't make up your mind finally about Miss Gwilt until events have put those two opposite opinions of ours to the test that I have proposed. A fairer test there can't be. I agree with you that no lady worthy of the name could attempt to force her way in here, after receiving your letter. But I deny that Miss Gwilt is worthy of the name; and I say she will try to force her way in here in spite of you."

"And I say she won't!" retorted Allan, firmly.

Pedgift Senior leaned back in his chair and smiled. There was a momentary silence, and in that silence the door-bell rang.

The lawyer and the client both looked expectantly in the direction of the hall.

"No," cried Allan, more angrily than ever.

"Yes!" cried Pedgift Senior, contradicting him with the utmost politeness.

They waited the event. The opening of the house door was audible, but the room was too far from it for the sound of voices to reach the ear as well. After a long interval of expectation, the closing of the door was heard at last. Allan rose impetuously and rang the bell. Mr. Pedgift the elder sat sublimely calm, and enjoyed, with a gentle zest, the largest pinch of snuff he had taken yet.

"Anybody for me?" asked Allan, when the servant came in.

The man looked at Pedgift Senior, with an expression of unutterable reverence, and answered, "Miss Gwilt."

"I don't want to crow over you, sir," said Mr. Pedgift the elder, when the servant had withdrawn. "But what do you think of Miss Gwilt *now*?"

Allan shook his head in silent discouragement and distress.

"Time is of some importance, Mr. Armadale. After what has just happened, do you still object to taking the course I have had the honor of suggesting to you?"

"I can't, Mr. Pedgift," said Allan. "I can't be the means of disgracing her in the neighborhood. I would rather be disgraced myself – as I am."

"Let me put it in another way, sir. Excuse my persisting. You have been very kind to me and my family; and I have a personal interest, as well as a professional interest, in you. If you can't prevail on yourself to show this woman's character in its true light, will you take common precautions to prevent

her doing any more harm? Will you consent to having her privately watched as long as she remains in this neighborhood?"

For the second time Allan shook his head.

"Is that your final resolution, sir?"

"It is, Mr. Pedgift; but I am much obliged to you for your advice, all the same."

Pedgift Senior rose in a state of gentle resignation, and took up his hat "Good-evening, sir," he said, and made sorrowfully for the door. Allan rose on his side, innocently supposing that the interview was at an end. Persons better acquainted with the diplomatic habits of his legal adviser would have recommended him to keep his seat. The time was ripe for "Pedgift's postscript," and the lawyer's indicative snuff-box was at that moment in one of his hands, as he opened the door with the other.

"Good-evening," said Allan.

Pedgift Senior opened the door, stopped, considered, closed the door again, came back mysteriously with his pinch of snuff in suspense between his box and his nose, and repeating his invariable formula, "By-the-by, there's a point occurs to me," quietly resumed possession of his empty chair.

Allan, wondering, took the seat, in his turn, which he had just left. Lawyer and client looked at each other once more, and the inexhaustible interview began again.

CHAPTER VI PEDGIFT'S POSTSCRIPT

"I mentioned that a point had occurred to me, sir," remarked Pedgift Senior.

"You did," said Allan.

"Would you like to hear what it is, Mr. Armadale?"

"If you please," said Allan.

"With all my heart, sir! This is the point. I attach considerable importance — if nothing else can be done — to having Miss Gwilt privately looked after, as long as she stops at Thorpe Ambrose. It struck me just now at the door, Mr. Armadale, that what you are not willing to do for your own security, you might be willing to do for the security of another person."

"What other person?" inquired Allan.

"A young lady who is a near neighbor of yours, sir. Shall I mention the name in confidence? Miss Milroy."

Allan started, and changed color.

"Miss Milroy!" he repeated. "Can *she* be concerned in this miserable business? I hope not, Mr. Pedgift; I sincerely hope not."

"I paid a visit, in your interests, sir, at the cottage this morning," proceeded Pedgift Senior. "You shall hear what happened

there, and judge for yourself. Major Milroy has been expressing his opinion of you pretty freely; and I thought it highly desirable to give him a caution. It's always the way with those quiet addle-headed men: when they do once wake up, there's no reasoning with their obstinacy, and no quieting their violence. Well, sir, this morning I went to the cottage. The major and Miss Neelie were both in the parlor – miss not looking so pretty as usual; pale, I thought, pale, and worn, and anxious. Up jumps the addle-headed major (I wouldn't give *that*, Mr. Armadale, for the brains of a man who can occupy himself for half his lifetime in making a clock!) – up jumps the addle-headed major, in the loftiest manner, and actually tries to look me down. Ha! ha! the idea of anybody looking *me* down, at my time of life. I behaved like a Christian; I nodded kindly to old What's-o'clock 'Fine morning, major,' says I. 'Have you any business with me?' says he. 'Just a word,' says I. Miss Neelie, like the sensible girl she is, gets up to leave the room; and what does her ridiculous father do? He stops her. 'You needn't go, my dear, I have nothing to say to Mr. Pedgift,' says this old military idiot, and turns my way, and tries to look me down again. 'You are Mr. Armadale's lawyer,' says he; 'if you come on any business relating to Mr. Armadale, I refer you to my solicitor.' (His solicitor is Darch; and Darch has had enough of *me* in business, I can tell you!) 'My errand here, major, does certainly relate to Mr. Armadale,' says I; 'but it doesn't concern your lawyer – at any rate, just yet. I wish to caution you to suspend your opinion of my client, or, if you won't do that, to be careful how you express it in public. I warn you that our turn is to come, and that you are not at the end yet of this scandal

about Miss Gwilt.' It struck me as likely that he would lose his temper when he found himself tackled in that way, and he amply fulfilled my expectations. He was quite violent in his language – the poor weak creature – actually violent with *me*! I behaved like a Christian again; I nodded kindly, and wished him good-morning. When I looked round to wish Miss Neelie good-morning, too, she was gone. You seem restless, Mr. Armadale," remarked Pedgift Senior, as Allan, feeling the sting of old recollections, suddenly started out of his chair, and began pacing up and down the room. "I won't try your patience much longer, sir; I am coming to the point."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Pedgift," said Allan, returning to his seat, and trying to look composedly at the lawyer through the intervening image of Neelie which the lawyer had called up.

"Well, sir, I left the cottage," resumed Pedgift Senior. "Just as I turned the corner from the garden into the park, whom should I stumble on but Miss Neelie herself, evidently on the lookout for me. 'I want to speak to you for one moment, Mr. Pedgift!' says she. 'Does Mr. Armadale think *me* mixed up in this matter?' She was violently agitated – tears in her eyes, sir, of the sort which my legal experience has *not* accustomed me to see. I quite forgot myself; I actually gave her my arm, and led her away gently among the trees. (A nice position to find me in, if any of the scandal-mongers of the town had happened to be walking in that direction!) 'My dear Miss Milroy,' says I, 'why should Mr. Armadale think *you* mixed up in it?'"

"You ought to have told her at once that I thought nothing of the kind!" exclaimed Allan, indignantly. "Why did you leave her a moment in doubt about it?"

"Because I am a lawyer, Mr. Armadale," rejoined Pedgift Senior, dryly. "Even in moments of sentiment, under convenient trees, with a pretty girl on my arm, I can't entirely divest myself of my professional caution. Don't look distressed, sir, pray! I set things right in due course of time. Before I left Miss Milroy, I told her, in the plainest terms, no such idea had ever entered your head."

"Did she seem relieved?" asked Allan.

"She was able to dispense with the use of my arm, sir," replied old Pedgift, as dryly as ever, "and to pledge me to inviolable secrecy on the subject of our interview. She was particularly desirous that *you* should hear nothing about it. If you are at all anxious on your side to know why I am now betraying her confidence, I beg to inform you that her confidence related to no less a person than the lady who favored you with a call just now — Miss Gwilt."

Allan, who had been once more restlessly pacing the room, stopped, and returned to his chair.

"Is this serious?" he asked.

"Most serious, sir," returned Pedgift Senior. "I am betraying Miss Neelie's secret, in Miss Neelie's own interest. Let us go back to that cautious question I put to her. She found some little difficulty in answering it, for the reply involved her in a narrative of the parting interview between her governess and herself. This is the substance of it. The two were alone when Miss Gwilt took leave of her pupil; and the words she used (as reported to me by Miss Neelie) were these. She said, 'Your mother has declined to allow me to take leave of her. Do you decline too?' Miss Neelie's answer was a remarkably sensible

one for a girl of her age. 'We have not been good friends,' she said, 'and I believe we are equally glad to part with each other. But I have no wish to decline taking leave of you.' Saying that, she held out her hand. Miss Gwilt stood looking at her steadily, without taking it, and addressed her in these words: '*You are not Mrs. Armadale yet.*' Gently, sir! Keep your temper. It's not at all wonderful that a woman, conscious of having her own mercenary designs on you, should attribute similar designs to a young lady who happens to be your near neighbor. Let me go on. Miss Neelie, by her own confession (and quite naturally, I think), was excessively indignant. She owns to having answered, 'You shameless creature, how dare you say that to me!' Miss Gwilt's rejoinder was rather a remarkable one – the anger, on her side, appears to have been of the cool, still, venomous kind. 'Nobody ever yet injured me, Miss Milroy,' she said, 'without sooner or later bitterly repenting it. *You will bitterly repent it.*' She stood looking at her pupil for a moment in dead silence, and then left the room. Miss Neelie appears to have felt the imputation fastened on her, in connection with you, far more sensitively than she felt the threat. She had previously known, as everybody had known in the house, that some unacknowledged proceedings of yours in London had led to Miss Gwilt's voluntary withdrawal from her situation. And she now inferred, from the language addressed to her, that she was actually believed by Miss Gwilt to have set those proceedings on foot, to advance herself, and to injure her governess, in your estimation. Gently, sir, gently! I haven't quite done yet. As soon as Miss Neelie had recovered herself, she went upstairs to speak to Mrs. Milroy. Miss Gwilt's abominable imputation

had taken her by surprise; and she went to her mother first for enlightenment and advice. She got neither the one nor the other. Mrs. Milroy declared she was too ill to enter on the subject, and she has remained too ill to enter on it ever since. Miss Neelie applied next to her father. The major stopped her the moment your name passed her lips: he declared he would never hear you mentioned again by any member of his family. She has been left in the dark from that time to this, not knowing how she might have been misrepresented by Miss Gwilt, or what falsehoods you might have been led to believe of her. At my age and in my profession, I don't profess to have any extraordinary softness of heart. But I do think, Mr. Armadale, that Miss Neelie's position deserves our sympathy."

"I'll do anything to help her!" cried Allan, impulsively. "You don't know, Mr. Pedgift, what reason I have – " He checked himself, and confusedly repeated his first words. "I'll do anything," he reiterated earnestly – "anything in the world to help her!"

"Do you really mean that, Mr. Armadale? Excuse my asking; but you can very materially help Miss Neelie, if you choose!"

"How?" asked Allan. "Only tell me how!"

"By giving me your authority, sir, to protect her from Miss Gwilt."

Having fired that shot pointblank at his client, the wise lawyer waited a little to let it take its effect before he said any more.

Allan's face clouded, and he shifted uneasily from side to side of his chair.

"Your son is hard enough to deal with, Mr. Pedgift," he said, "and you are harder than your son."

"Thank you, sir," rejoined the ready Pedgift, "in my son's name and my own, for a handsome compliment to the firm. If you really wish to be of assistance to Miss Neelie," he went on, more seriously, "I have shown you the way. You can do nothing to quiet her anxiety which I have not done already. As soon 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!"

CHAPTER 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. Landholders 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 appear-

ance 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 mate-

rial. 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 qua-

vered 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 con-

fidence 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 clung close to it. The woman who had tyrannized over Mr. Bashwood was gone, and the woman who had tossed the spy's hat into the pool was gone. A timid, shrinking, interesting creature filled the fair skin and trembled on the symmetrical limbs of Miss Gwilt. She put her handkerchief to her eyes. "They say necessity has no law," she murmured, faintly. "I am treating you like an old friend. God knows I want one!"

They went on toward the town. She recovered herself with a touching fortitude; she put her handkerchief back in her pocket, and persisted in turning the conversation on Midwinter's walking tour. "It is bad enough to be a burden on you,"

she said, gently pressing on his arm as she spoke; "I mustn't distress you as well. Tell me where you have been, and what you have seen. Interest me in your journey; help me to escape from myself."

They reached the modest little lodging in the miserable little suburb. Miss Gwilt sighed, and removed her glove before she took Midwinter's hand. "I have taken refuge here," she said, simply. "It is clean and quiet; I am too poor to want or expect more. We must say good-by, I suppose, unless" — she hesitated modestly, and satisfied herself by a quick look round that they were unobserved — "unless you would like to come in and rest a little? I feel so gratefully toward you, Mr. Midwinter! Is there any harm, do you think, in my offering you a cup of tea?"

The magnetic influence of her touch was thrilling through him while she spoke. Change and absence, to which he had trusted to weaken her hold on him, had treacherously strengthened it instead. A man exceptionally sensitive, a man exceptionally pure in his past life, he stood hand in hand, in the tempting secrecy of the night, with the first woman who had exercised over him the all-absorbing influence of her sex. At his age, and in his position, who could have left her? The man (with a man's temperament) doesn't live who could have left her. Midwinter went in.

A stupid, sleepy lad opened the house door. Even he, being a male creature, brightened under the influence of Miss Gwilt. "The urn, John," she said, kindly, "and another cup and saucer. I'll borrow your candle to light my candles upstairs, and then I won't trouble you any more to-night." John was wakeful and active in an instant. "No trouble, miss," he said, with awkward

civility. Miss Gwilt took his candle with a smile. "How good people are to me!" she whispered, innocently, to Midwinter, as she led the way upstairs to the little drawing-room on the first floor.

She lit the candles, and, turning quickly on her guest, stopped him at the first attempt he made to remove the knapsack from his shoulders. "No," she said, gently; "in the good old times there were occasions when the ladies unarmed their knights. I claim the privilege of unarming *my* knight." Her dexterous fingers intercepted his at the straps and buckles, and she had the dusty knapsack off, before he could protest against her touching it.

They sat down at the one little table in the room. It was very poorly furnished; but there was something of the dainty neatness of the woman who inhabited it in the arrangement of the few poor ornaments on the chimney-piece, in the one or two prettily bound volumes on the chiffonier, in the flowers on the table, and the modest little work-basket in the window. "Women are not all coquettes," she said, as she took off her bonnet and mantilla, and laid them carefully on a chair. "I won't go into my room, and look in my glass, and make myself smart; you shall take me just as I am." Her hands moved about among the tea-things with a smooth, noiseless activity.

Her magnificent hair flashed crimson in the candle-light, as she turned her head hither and thither, searching with an easy grace for the things she wanted in the tray. Exercise had heightened the brilliancy of her complexion, and had quickened the rapid alternations of expression in her eyes – the delicious languor that stole over them when she was listen-

ing or thinking, the bright intelligence that flashed from them softly when she spoke. In the lightest word she said, in the least thing she did, there was something that gently solicited the heart of the man who sat with her. Perfectly modest in her manner, possessed to perfection of the graceful restraints and refinements of a lady, she had all the allurements that feast the eye, all the siren invitations that seduce the sense – a subtle suggestiveness in her silence, and a sexual sorcery in her smile.

“Should I be wrong,” she asked, suddenly suspending the conversation which she had thus far persistently restricted to the subject of Midwinter’s walking tour, “if I guessed that you have something on your mind – something which neither my tea nor my talk can charm away? Are men as curious as women? Is the something – Me?”

Midwinter struggled against the fascination of looking at her and listening to her. “I am very anxious to hear what has happened since I have been away,” he said. “But I am still more anxious, Miss Gwilt, not to distress you by speaking of a painful subject.”

She looked at him gratefully. “It is for your sake that I have avoided the painful subject,” she said, toying with her spoon among the dregs in her empty cup. “But you will hear about it from others, if you don’t hear about it from me; and you ought to know why you found me in that strange situation, and why you see me here. Pray remember one thing, to begin with. I don’t blame your friend, Mr. Armadale. I blame the people whose instrument he is.”

Midwinter started. "Is it possible," he began, "that Allan can be in any way answerable —?" He stopped, and looked at Miss Gwilt in silent astonishment.

She gently laid her hand on his. "Don't be angry with me for only telling the truth," she said. "Your friend is answerable for everything that has happened to me — innocently answerable, Mr. Midwinter, I firmly believe. We are both victims. *He* is the victim of his position as the richest single man in the neighborhood; and I am the victim of Miss Milroy's determination to marry him."

"Miss Milroy?" repeated Midwinter, more and more astonished. "Why, Allan himself told me —" He stopped again.

"He told you that I was the object of his admiration? Poor fellow, he admires everybody; his head is almost as empty as this," said Miss Gwilt, smiling indicatively into the hollow of her cup. She dropped the spoon, sighed, and became serious again. "I am guilty of the vanity of having let him admire me," she went on, penitently, "without the excuse of being able, on my side, to reciprocate even the passing interest that he felt in me. I don't undervalue his many admirable qualities, or the excellent position he can offer to his wife. But a woman's heart is not to be commanded — no, Mr. Midwinter, not even by the fortunate master of Thorpe Ambrose, who commands everything else."

She looked him full in the face as she uttered that magnanimous sentiment. His eyes dropped before hers, and his dark color deepened. He had felt his heart leap in him at the declaration of her indifference to Allan. For the first time since they

had known each other, his interests now stood self-revealed before him as openly adverse to the interests of his friend.

"I have been guilty of the vanity of letting Mr. Armadale admire me, and I have suffered for it," resumed Miss Gwilt. "If there had been any confidence between my pupil and me, I might have easily satisfied her that she might become Mrs. Armadale – if she could – without having any rivalry to fear on my part. But Miss Milroy disliked and distrusted me from the first. She took her own jealous view, no doubt, of Mr. Armadale's thoughtless attentions to me. It was her interest to destroy the position, such as it was, that I held in his estimation; and it is quite likely her mother assisted her. Mrs. Milroy had her motive also (which I am really ashamed to mention) for wishing to drive me out of the house. Anyhow, the conspiracy has succeeded. I have been forced (with Mr. Armadale's help) to leave the major's service. Don't be angry, Mr. Midwinter! Don't form a hasty opinion! I dare say Miss Milroy has some good qualities, though I have not found them out; and I assure you again and again that I don't blame Mr. Armadale. I only blame the people whose instrument he is."

"How is he their instrument? How can he be the instrument of any enemy of yours?" asked Midwinter. "Pray excuse my anxiety, Miss Gwilt: Allan's good name is as dear to me as my own!"

Miss Gwilt's eyes turned full on him again, and Miss Gwilt's heart abandoned itself innocently to an outburst of enthusiasm. "How I admire your earnestness!" she said. "How I like your anxiety for your friend! Oh, if women could only form such friendships! Oh you happy, happy men!" Her voice fal-

tered, and her convenient tea-cup absorbed her for the third time. "I would give all the little beauty I possess," she said, "if I could only find such a friend as Mr. Armadale has found in *you*. I never shall, Mr. Midwinter – I never shall. Let us go back to what we were talking about. I can only tell you how your friend is concerned in my misfortune by telling you something first about myself. I am like many other governesses; I am the victim of sad domestic circumstances. It may be weak of me, but I have a horror of alluding to them among strangers. My silence about my family and my friends exposes me to misinterpretation in my dependent position. Does it do me any harm, Mr. Midwinter, in your estimation?"

"God forbid!" said Midwinter, fervently. "There is no man living," he went on, thinking of his own family story, "who has better reason to understand and respect your silence than I have."

Miss Gwilt seized his hand impulsively. "Oh," she said, "I knew it, the first moment I saw you! I knew that you, too, had suffered; that you, too, had sorrows which you kept sacred! Strange, strange sympathy! I believe in mesmerism – do you?" She suddenly recollected herself, and shuddered. "Oh, what have I done? What must you think of me?" she exclaimed, as he yielded to the magnetic fascination of her touch, and, forgetting everything but the hand that lay warm in his own, bent over it and kissed it. "Spare me!" she said, faintly, as she felt the burning touch of his lips. "I am so friendless – I am so completely at your mercy!"

He turned away from her, and hid his face in his hands; he was trembling, and she saw it. She looked at him while his face

was hidden from her; she looked at him with a furtive interest and surprise. "How that man loves me!" she thought. "I wonder whether there was a time when I might have loved *him*?"

The silence between them remained unbroken for some minutes. He had felt her appeal to his consideration as she had never expected or intended him to feel it — he shrank from looking at her or from speaking to her again.

"Shall I go on with my story?" she asked. "Shall we forget and forgive on both sides?" A woman's inveterate indulgence for every expression of a man's admiration which keeps within the limits of personal respect curved her lips gently into a charming smile. She looked down meditatively at her dress, and brushed a crumb off her lap with a little flattering sigh. "I was telling you," she went on, "of my reluctance to speak to strangers of my sad family story. It was in that way, as I afterward found out, that I laid myself open to Miss Milroy's malice and Miss Milroy's suspicion. Private inquiries about me were addressed to the lady who was my reference — at Miss Milroy's suggestion, in the first instance, I have no doubt. I am sorry to say, this is not the worst of it. By some underhand means, of which I am quite ignorant, Mr. Armadale's simplicity was imposed on; and, when application was made secretly to my reference in London, it was made, Mr. Midwinter, through your friend."

Midwinter suddenly rose from his chair and looked at her. The fascination that she exercised over him, powerful as it was, became a suspended influence, now that the plain disclosure came plainly at last from her lips. He looked at her, and sat down again, like a man bewildered, without uttering a word.

"Remember how weak he is," pleaded Miss Gwilt, gently, "and make allowances for him as I do. The trifling accident of his failing to find my reference at the address given him seems, I can't imagine why, to have excited Mr. Armadale's suspicion. At any rate, he remained in London. What he did there, it is impossible for me to say. I was quite in the dark; I knew nothing; I distrusted nobody; I was as happy in my little round of duties as I could be with a pupil whose affections I had failed to win, when, one morning, to my indescribable astonishment, Major Milroy showed me a correspondence between Mr. Armadale and himself. He spoke to me in his wife's presence. Poor creature, I make no complaint of her; such affliction as she suffers excuses everything. I wish I could give you some idea of the letters between Major Milroy and Mr. Armadale; but my head is only a woman's head, and I was so confused and distressed at the time! All I can tell you is that Mr. Armadale chose to preserve silence about his proceedings in London, under circumstances which made that silence a reflection on my character. The major was most kind; his confidence in me remained unshaken; but could his confidence protect me against his wife's prejudice and his daughter's ill-will? Oh, the hardness of women to each other! Oh, the humiliation if men only knew some of us as we really are! What could I do? I couldn't defend myself against mere imputations; and I couldn't remain in my situation after a slur had been cast on me. My pride (Heaven help me, I was brought up like a gentlewoman, and I have sensibilities that are not blunted even yet!) — my pride got the better of me, and I left my place. Don't let it distress you, Mr. Midwinter! There's a bright side to the picture. The ladies in

the neighborhood have overwhelmed me with kindness; I have the prospect of getting pupils to teach; I am spared the mortification of going back to be a burden on my friends. The only complaint I have to make is, I think, a just one. Mr. Armadale has been back at Thorpe Ambrose for some days. I have entreated him, by letter, to grant me an interview; to tell me what dreadful suspicions he has of me, and to let me set myself right in his estimation. Would you believe it? He has declined to see me – under the influence of others, not of his own free will, I am sure! Cruel, isn't it? But he has even used me more cruelly still; he persists in suspecting me; it is he who is having me watched. Oh, Mr. Midwinter, don't hate me for telling you what you *must* know! The man you found persecuting me and frightening me to-night was only earning his money, after all, as Mr. Armadale's spy."

Once more Midwinter started to his feet; and this time the thoughts that were in him found their way into words.

"I can't believe it; I won't believe it!" he exclaimed, indignantly. "If the man told you that, the man lied. I beg your pardon, Miss Gwilt; I beg your pardon from the bottom of my heart. Don't, pray don't think I doubt *you*; I only say there is some dreadful mistake. I am not sure that I understand as I ought all that you have told me. But this last infamous meanness of which you think Allan guilty, I *do* understand. I swear to you, he is incapable of it! Some scoundrel has been taking advantage of him; some scoundrel has been using his name. I'll prove it to you, if you will only give me time. Let me go and clear it up at once. I can't rest; I can't bear to think of it; I can't even enjoy the pleasure of being here. Oh," he burst out des-

perately, "I'm sure you feel for me, after what you have said – I feel so for *you!*"

He stopped in confusion. Miss Gwilt's eyes were looking at him again, and Miss Gwilt's hand had found its way once more into his own.

"You are the most generous of living men," she said, softly. "I will believe what you tell me to believe. Go," she added, in a whisper, suddenly releasing his hand, and turning away from him. "For both our sakes, go!"

His heart beat fast; he looked at her as she dropped into a chair and put her handkerchief to her eyes. For one moment he hesitated; the next, he snatched up his knapsack from the floor, and left her precipitately, without a backward look or a parting word.

She rose when the door closed on him. A change came over her the instant she was alone. The color faded out of her cheeks; the beauty died out of her eyes; her face hardened horribly with a silent despair. "It's even baser work than I bargained for," she said, "to deceive *him*." After pacing to and fro in the room for some minutes, she stopped wearily before the glass over the fire-place. "You strange creature!" she murmured, leaning her elbows on the mantelpiece, and languidly addressing the reflection of herself in the glass. "Have you got any conscience left? And has that man roused it?"

The reflection of her face changed slowly. The color returned to her cheeks, the delicious languor began to suffuse her eyes again. Her lips parted gently, and her quickening breath began to dim the surface of the glass. She drew back from it, after a moment's absorption in her own thoughts, with

a start of terror. "What am I doing?" she asked herself, in a sudden panic of astonishment. "Am I mad enough to be thinking of him in *that* way?"

She burst into a mocking laugh, and opened her desk on the table recklessly with a bang. "It's high time I had some talk with Mother Jezebel," she said, and sat down to write to Mrs. Oldershaw.

"I have met with Mr. Midwinter," she began, "under very lucky circumstances; and I have made the most of my opportunity. He has just left me for his friend Armadale; and one of two good things will happen to-morrow. If they don't quarrel, the doors of Thorpe Ambrose will be opened to me again at Mr. Midwinter's intercession. If they do quarrel, I shall be the unhappy cause of it, and I shall find my way in for myself, on the purely Christian errand of reconciling them."

She hesitated at the next sentence, wrote the first few words of it, scratched them out again, and petulantly tore the letter into fragments, and threw the pen to the other end of the room. Turning quickly on her chair, she looked at the seat which Midwinter had occupied, her foot restlessly tapping the floor, and her handkerchief thrust like a gag between her clinched teeth. "Young as you are," she thought, with her mind reviving the image of him in the empty chair, "there has been something out of the common in *your* life; and I must and will know it!"

The house clock struck the hour, and roused her. She sighed, and, walking back to the glass, wearily loosened the fastenings of her dress; wearily removed the studs from the chemisette beneath it, and put them on the chimney-piece.

She looked indolently at the reflected beauties of her neck and bosom, as she unplaited her hair and threw it back in one great mass over her shoulders. "Fancy," she thought, "if he saw me now!" She turned back to the table, and sighed again as she extinguished one of the candles and took the other in her hand. "Midwinter?" she said, as she passed through the folding-doors of the room to her bed-chamber. "I don't believe in his name, to begin with!"

The night had advanced by more than an hour before Midwinter was back again at the great house.

Twice, well as the homeward way was known to him, he had strayed out of the right road. The events of the evening – the interview with Miss Gwilt herself, after his fortnight's solitary thinking of her; the extraordinary change that had taken place in her position since he had seen her last; and the startling assertion of Allan's connection with it – had all conspired to throw his mind into a state of ungovernable confusion. The darkness of the cloudy night added to his bewilderment. Even the familiar gates of Thorpe Ambrose seemed strange to him. When he tried to think of it, it was a mystery to him how he had reached the place.

The front of the house was dark, and closed for the night. Midwinter went round to the back. The sound of men's voices, as he advanced, caught his ear. They were soon distinguishable as the voices of the first and second footman, and the subject of conversation between them was their master.

"I'll bet you an even half-crown he's driven out of the neighborhood before another week is over his head," said the first footman.

"Done!" said the second. "He isn't as easy driven as you think."

"Isn't he?" retorted the other. "He'll be mobbed if he stops here! I tell you again, he's not satisfied with the mess he's got into already. I know it for certain, he's having the governess watched."

At those words, Midwinter mechanically checked himself before he turned the corner of the house. His first doubt of the result of his meditated appeal to Allan ran through him like a sudden chill. The influence exercised by the voice of public scandal is a force which acts in opposition to the ordinary law of mechanics. It is strongest, not by concentration, but by distribution. To the primary sound we may shut our ears; but the reverberation of it in echoes is irresistible. On his way back, Midwinter's one desire had been to find Allan up, and to speak to him immediately. His one hope now was to gain time to contend with the new doubts and to silence the new misgivings; his one present anxiety was to hear that Allan had gone to bed. He turned the corner of the house, and presented himself before the men smoking their pipes in the back garden. As soon as their astonishment allowed them to speak, they offered to rouse their master. Allan had given his friend up for that night, and had gone to bed about half an hour since.

"It was my master's particular order, sir," said the head-footman, "that he was to be told of it if you came back."

"It is *my* particular request," returned Midwinter, "that you won't disturb him."

The men looked at each other wonderingly, as he took his candle and left them.

CHAPTER VIII

SHE COMES BETWEEN THEM

Appointed hours for the various domestic events of the day were things unknown at Thorpe Ambrose. Irregular in all his habits, Allan accommodated himself to no stated times (with the solitary exception of dinner-time) at any hour of the day or night. He retired to rest early or late, and he rose early or late, exactly as he felt inclined. The servants were forbidden to call him; and Mrs. Gripper was accustomed to improvise the breakfast as she best might, from the time when the kitchen fire was first lighted to the time when the clock stood on the stroke of noon.

Toward nine o'clock on the morning after his return Midwinter knocked at Allan's door, and on entering the room found it empty. After inquiry among the servants, it appeared that Allan had risen that morning before the man who usually attended on him was up, and that his hot water had been brought to the door by one of the house-maids, who was then still in ignorance of Midwinter's return. Nobody had chanced to see the master, either on the stairs or in the hall; nobody had heard him ring the bell for breakfast, as usual. In brief,

nobody knew anything about him, except what was obviously clear to all – that he was not in the house.

Midwinter went out under the great portico. He stood at the head of the flight of steps considering in which direction he should set forth to look for his friend. Allan's unexpected absence added one more to the disquieting influences which still perplexed his mind. He was in the mood in which trifles irritate a man, and fancies are all-powerful to exalt or depress his spirits.

The sky was cloudy; and the wind blew in puffs from the south; there was every prospect, to weather-wise eyes, of coming rain. While Midwinter was still hesitating, one of the grooms passed him on the drive below. The man proved, on being questioned, to be better informed about his master's movements than the servants indoors. He had seen Allan pass the stables more than an hour since, going out by the back way into the park with a nosegay in his hand.

A nosegay in his hand? The nosegay hung incomprehensibly on Midwinter's mind as he walked round, on the chance of meeting Allan, to the back of the house. "What does the nosegay mean?" he asked himself, with an unintelligible sense of irritation, and a petulant kick at a stone that stood in his way.

It meant that Allan had been following his impulses as usual. The one pleasant impression left on his mind after his interview with Pedgift Senior was the impression made by the lawyer's account of his conversation with Neelie in the park. The anxiety that he should not misjudge her, which the major's daughter had so earnestly expressed, placed her before Allan's eyes in an irresistibly attractive character – the character of

the one person among all his neighbors who had some respect still left for his good opinion. Acutely sensible of his social isolation, now that there was no Midwinter to keep him company in the empty house, hungering and thirsting in his solitude for a kind word and a friendly look, he began to think more and more regretfully and more and more longingly of the bright young face so pleasantly associated with his first happiest days at Thorpe Ambrose. To be conscious of such a feeling as this was, with a character like Allan's, to act on it headlong, lead him where it might. He had gone out on the previous morning to look for Neelie with a peace-offering of flowers, but with no very distinct idea of what he should say to her if they met; and failing to find her on the scene of her customary walks, he had characteristically persisted the next morning in making a second attempt with another peace-offering on a larger scale. Still ignorant of his friend's return, he was now at some distance from the house, searching the park in a direction which he had not tried yet.

After walking out a few hundred yards beyond the stables, and failing to discover any signs of Allan, Midwinter retraced his steps, and waited for his friend's return, pacing slowly to and fro on the little strip of garden ground at the back of the house.

From time to time, as he passed it, he looked in absently at the room which had formerly been Mrs. Armadale's, which was now (through his interposition) habitually occupied by her son – the room with the Statuette on the bracket, and the French windows opening to the ground, which had once recalled to him the Second Vision of the Dream. The Shadow

of the Man, which Allan had seen standing opposite to him at the long window; the view over a lawn and flower-garden; the pattering of the rain against the glass; the stretching out of the Shadow's arm, and the fall of the statue in fragments on the floor – these objects and events of the visionary scene, so vividly present to his memory once, were all superseded by later remembrances now, were all left to fade as they might in the dim background of time. He could pass the room again and again, alone and anxious, and never once think of the boat drifting away in the moonlight, and the night's imprisonment on the Wrecked Ship!

Toward ten o'clock the well-remembered sound of Allan's voice became suddenly audible in the direction of the stables. In a moment more he was visible from the garden. His second morning's search for Neelie had ended to all appearance in a second defeat of his object. The nosegay was still in his hand; and he was resignedly making a present of it to one of the coachman's children.

Midwinter impulsively took a step forward toward the stables, and abruptly checked his further progress.

Conscious that his position toward his friend was altered already in relation to Miss Gwilt, the first sight of Allan filled his mind with a sudden distrust of the governess's influence over him, which was almost a distrust of himself. He knew that he had set forth from the moors on his return to Thorpe Ambrose with the resolution of acknowledging the passion that had mastered him, and of insisting, if necessary, on a second and a longer absence in the interests of the sacrifice which he was bent on making to the happiness of his friend. What

had become of that resolution now? The discovery of Miss Gwilt's altered position, and the declaration that she had voluntarily made of her indifference to Allan, had scattered it to the winds. The first words with which he would have met his friend, if nothing had happened to him on the homeward way, were words already dismissed from his lips. He drew back as he felt it, and struggled, with an instinctive loyalty toward Allan, to free himself at the last moment from the influence of Miss Gwilt.

Having disposed of his useless nosegay, Allan passed on into the garden, and the instant he entered it recognized Midwinter with a loud cry of surprise and delight.

"Am I awake or dreaming?" he exclaimed, seizing his friend excitably by both hands. "You dear old Midwinter, have you sprung up out of the ground, or have you dropped from the clouds?"

It was not till Midwinter had explained the mystery of his unexpected appearance in every particular that Allan could be prevailed on to say a word about himself. When he did speak, he shook his head ruefully, and subdued the hearty loudness of his voice, with a preliminary look round to see if the servants were within hearing.

"I've learned to be cautious since you went away and left me," said Allan. "My dear fellow, you haven't the least notion what things have happened, and what an awful scrape I'm in at this very moment!"

"You are mistaken, Allan. I have heard more of what has happened than you suppose."

"What! the dreadful mess I'm in with Miss Gwilt? the row with the major? the infernal scandal-mongering in the neighborhood? You don't mean to say —?"

"Yes," interposed Midwinter, quietly; "I have heard of it all."

"Good heavens! how? Did you stop at Thorpe Ambrose on your way back? Have you been in the coffee-room at the hotel? Have you met Pedgift? Have you dropped into the Reading Rooms, and seen what they call the freedom of the press in the town newspaper?"

Midwinter paused before he answered, and looked up at the sky. The clouds had been gathering unnoticed over their heads, and the first rain-drops were beginning to fall.

"Come in here," said Allan. "We'll go up to breakfast this way." He led Midwinter through the open French window into his own sitting-room. The wind blew toward that side of the house, and the rain followed them in. Midwinter, who was last, turned and closed the window.

Allan was too eager for the answer which the weather had interrupted to wait for it till they reached the breakfast-room. He stopped close at the window, and added two more to his string of questions.

"How can you possibly have heard about me and Miss Gwilt?" he asked. "Who told you?"

"Miss Gwilt herself," replied Midwinter, gravely.

Allan's manner changed the moment the governess's name passed his friend's lips.

"I wish you had heard my story first," he said. "Where did you meet with Miss Gwilt?"

There was a momentary pause. They both stood still at the window, absorbed in the interest of the moment. They both forgot that their contemplated place of shelter from the rain had been the breakfast-room upstairs.

"Before I answer your question," said Midwinter, a little constrainedly, "I want to ask you something, Allan, on my side. Is it really true that you are in some way concerned in Miss Gwilt's leaving Major Milroy's service?"

There was another pause. The disturbance which had begun to appear in Allan's manner palpably increased.

"It's rather a long story," he began. "I have been taken in, Midwinter. I've been imposed on by a person, who – I can't help saying it – who cheated me into promising what I oughtn't to have promised, and doing what I had better not have done. It isn't breaking my promise to tell you. I can trust in your discretion, can't I? You will never say a word, will you?"

"Stop!" said Midwinter. "Don't trust me with any secrets which are not your own. If you have given a promise, don't trifle with it, even in speaking to such an intimate friend as I am." He laid his hand gently and kindly on Allan's shoulder. "I can't help seeing that I have made you a little uncomfortable," he went on. "I can't help seeing that my question is not so easy a one to answer as I had hoped and supposed. Shall we wait a little? Shall we go upstairs and breakfast first?"

Allan was far too earnestly bent on presenting his conduct to his friend in the right aspect to heed Midwinter's suggestion. He spoke eagerly on the instant, without moving from the window.

"My dear fellow, it's a perfectly easy question to answer. Only" – he hesitated – "only it requires what I'm a bad hand at: it requires an explanation."

"Do you mean," asked Midwinter, more seriously, but not less gently than before, "that you must first justify yourself, and then answer my question?"

"That's it!" said Allan, with an air of relief. "You're hit the right nail on the head, just as usual."

Midwinter's face darkened for the first time. "I am sorry to hear it," he said, his voice sinking low, and his eyes dropping to the ground as he spoke.

The rain was beginning to fall thickly. It swept across the garden, straight on the closed windows, and pattered heavily against the glass.

"Sorry!" repeated Allan. "My dear fellow, you haven't heard the particulars yet. Wait till I explain the thing first."

"You are a bad hand at explanations," said Midwinter, repeating Allan's own words. "Don't place yourself at a disadvantage. Don't explain it."

Allan looked at him, in silent perplexity and surprise.

"You are my friend – my best and dearest friend," Midwinter went on. "I can't bear to let you justify yourself to me as if I was your judge, or as if I doubted you." He looked up again at Allan frankly and kindly as he said those words. "Besides," he resumed, "I think, if I look into my memory, I can anticipate your explanation. We had a moment's talk, before I went away, about some very delicate questions which you proposed putting to Major Milroy. I remember I warned you; I remember I had my misgivings. Should I be guessing right if I guessed that

those questions have been in some way the means of leading you into a false position? If it is true that you have been concerned in Miss Gwilt's leaving her situation, is it also true – is it only doing you justice to believe – that any mischief for which you are responsible has been mischief innocently done?"

"Yes," said Allan, speaking, for the first time, a little constrainedly on his side. "It is only doing me justice to say that." He stopped and began drawing lines absently with his finger on the blurred surface of the window-pane. "You're not like other people, Midwinter," he resumed, suddenly, with an effort; "and I should have liked you to have heard the particulars all the same."

"I will hear them if you desire it," returned Midwinter. "But I am satisfied, without another word, that you have not willingly been the means of depriving Miss Gwilt of her situation. If that is understood between you and me, I think we need say no more. Besides, I have another question to ask, of much greater importance – a question that has been forced on me by what I saw with my own eyes, and heard with my own ears, last night."

He stopped, recoiling in spite of himself. "Shall we go upstairs first?" he asked, abruptly, leading the way to the door, and trying to gain time.

It was useless. Once again, the room which they were both free to leave, the room which one of them had twice tried to leave already, held them as if they were prisoners.

Without answering, without even appearing to have heard Midwinter's proposal to go upstairs, Allan followed him mechanically as far as the opposite side of the window. There he

stopped. "Midwinter!" he burst out, in a sudden panic of astonishment and alarm, "there seems to be something strange between us! You're not like yourself. What is it?"

With his hand on the lock of the door, Midwinter turned, and looked back into the room. The moment had come. His haunting fear of doing his friend an injustice had shown itself in a restraint of word, look, and action which had been marked enough to force its way to Allan's notice. The one course left now, in the dearest interests of the friendship that united them, was to speak at once, and to speak boldly.

"There's something strange between us," reiterated Allan. "For God's sake, what is it?"

Midwinter took his hand from the door, and came down again to the window, fronting Allan. He occupied the place, of necessity, which Allan had just left. It was the side of the window on which the Statuette stood. The little figure, placed on its projecting bracket, was, close behind him on his right hand. No signs of change appeared in the stormy sky. The rain still swept slanting across the garden, and pattered heavily against the glass.

"Give me your hand, Allan."

Allan gave it, and Midwinter held it firmly while he spoke.

"There is something strange between us," he said. "There is something to be set right which touches you nearly; and it has not been set right yet. You asked me just now where I met with Miss Gwilt. I met with her on my way back here, upon the high-road on the further side of the town. She entreated me to protect her from a man who was following and frighten-

ing her. I saw the scoundrel with my own eyes, and I should have laid hands on him, if Miss Gwilt herself had not stopped me. She gave a very strange reason for stopping me. She said I didn't know who his employer was."

Allan's ruddy color suddenly deepened; he looked aside quickly through the window at the pouring rain. At the same moment their hands fell apart, and there was a pause of silence on either side. Midwinter was the first to speak again.

"Later in the evening," he went on, "Miss Gwilt explained herself. She told me two things. She declared that the man whom I had seen following her was a hired spy. I was surprised, but I could not dispute it. She told me next, Allan – what I believe with my whole heart and soul to be a falsehood which has been imposed on her as the truth – she told me that the spy was in your employment!"

Allan turned instantly from the window, and looked Midwinter full in the face again. "I must explain myself this time," he said, resolutely.

The ashy paleness peculiar to him in moments of strong emotion began to show itself on Midwinter's cheeks.

"More explanations!" he said, and drew back a step, with his eyes fixed in a sudden terror of inquiry on Allan's face.

"You don't know what I know, Midwinter. You don't know that what I have done has been done with a good reason. And what is more, I have not trusted to myself – I have had good advice."

"Did you hear what I said just now?" asked Midwinter, incredulously. "You can't – surely, you can't have been attending to me?"

"I haven't missed a word," rejoined Allan. "I tell you again, you don't know what I know of Miss Gwilt. She has threatened Miss Milroy. Miss Milroy is in danger while her governess stops in this neighborhood."

Midwinter dismissed the major's daughter from the conversation with a contemptuous gesture of his hand.

"I don't want to hear about Miss, Milroy," he said. "Don't mix up Miss Milroy – Good God, Allan, am I to understand that the spy set to watch Miss Gwilt was doing his vile work with your approval?"

"Once for all, my dear fellow, will you, or will you not, let me explain?"

"Explain!" cried Midwinter, his eyes aflame, and his hot Creole blood rushing crimson into his face. "Explain the employment of a spy? What! after having driven Miss Gwilt out of her situation by meddling with her private affairs, you meddle again by the vilest of all means – the means of a paid spy? You set a watch on the woman whom you yourself told me you loved, only a fortnight since – the woman you were thinking of as your wife! I don't believe it; I won't believe it. Is my head failing me? Is it Allan Armadale I am speaking to? Is it Allan Armadale's face looking at me? Stop! you are acting under some mistaken scruple. Some low fellow has crept into your confidence, and has done this in your name without telling you first."

Allan controlled himself with admirable patience and admirable consideration for the temper of his friend. "If you persist in refusing to hear me," he said, "I must wait as well as I can till my turn comes."

"Tell me you are a stranger to the employment of that man, and I will hear you willingly."

"Suppose there should be a necessity, that you know nothing about, for employing him?"

"I acknowledge no necessity for the cowardly persecution of a helpless woman."

A momentary flush of irritation – momentary, and no more – passed over Allan's face. "You mightn't think her quite so helpless," he said, "if you knew the truth."

"Are *you* the man to tell me the truth?" retorted the other. "You who have refused to hear her in her own defense! You who have closed the doors of this house against her!"

Allan still controlled himself, but the effort began at last to be visible.

"I know your temper is a hot one," he said. "But for all that, your violence quite takes me by surprise. I can't account for it, unless" – he hesitated a moment, and then finished the sentence in his usual frank, outspoken way – "unless you are sweet yourself on Miss Gwilt."

Those last words heaped fuel on the fire. They stripped the truth instantly of all concealments and disguises, and laid it bare to view. Allan's instinct had guessed, and the guiding influence stood revealed of Midwinter's interest in Miss Gwilt.

"What right have you to say that?" he asked, with raised voice and threatening eyes.

"I told *you*," said Allan, simply, "when I thought I was sweet on her myself. Come! come! it's a little hard, I think, even if you are in love with her, to believe everything she tells you, and

not to let me say a word. Is *that* the way you decide between us?"

"Yes, it is!" cried the other, infuriated by Allan's second allusion to Miss Gwilt. "When I am asked to choose between the employer of a spy and the victim of a spy, I side with the victim!"

"Don't try me too hard, Midwinter, I have a temper to lose as well as you."

He stopped, struggling with himself. The torture of passion in Midwinter's face, from which a less simple and less generous nature might have recoiled in horror, touched Allan suddenly with an artless distress, which, at that moment, was little less than sublime. He advanced, with his eyes moistening, and his hand held out. "You asked me for my hand just now," he said, "and I gave it you. Will you remember old times, and give me yours, before it's too late?"

"No!" retorted Midwinter, furiously. "I may meet Miss Gwilt again, and I may want my hand free to deal with your spy!"

He had drawn back along the wall as Allan advanced, until the bracket which supported the Statuette was before instead of behind him. In the madness of his passion he saw nothing but Allan's face confronting him. In the madness of his passion, he stretched out his right hand as he answered, and shook it threateningly in the air. It struck the forgotten projection of the bracket – and the next instant the Statuette lay in fragments on the floor.

The rain drove slanting over flower-bed and lawn, and pattered heavily against the glass; and the two Armadales stood by the window, as the two Shadows had stood in the Second

Vision of the Dream, with the wreck of the image between them.

Allan stooped over the fragments of the little figure, and lifted them one by one from the floor.

"Leave me," he said, without looking up, "or we shall both repent it."

Without a word, Midwinter moved back slowly. He stood for the second time with his hand on the door, and looked his last at the room. The horror of the night on the Wreck had got him once more, and the flame of his passion was quenched in an instant.

"The Dream!" he whispered, under his breath. "The Dream again!"

The door was tried from the outside, and a servant appeared with a trivial message about the breakfast.

Midwinter looked at the man with a blank, dreadful helplessness in his face. "Show me the way out," he said. "The place is dark, and the room turns round with me."

The servant took him by the arm, and silently led him out.

As the door closed on them, Allan picked up the last fragment of the broken figure. He sat down alone at the table, and hid his face in his hands. The self-control which he had bravely preserved under exasperation renewed again and again now failed him at last in the friendless solitude of his room, and, in the first bitterness of feeling that Midwinter had turned against him like the rest, he burst into tears.

The moments followed each other, the slow time wore on. Little by little the signs of a new elemental disturbance began to show themselves in the summer storm. The shadow of

a swiftly deepening darkness swept over the sky. The pattering of the rain lessened with the lessening wind. There was a momentary hush of stillness. Then on a sudden the rain poured down again like a cataract, and the low roll of thunder came up solemnly on the dying air.

CHAPTER IX

SHE KNOWS THE TRUTH

1. From Mr. Bashwood to Miss Gwilt.

“Thorpe Ambrose, July 20th, 1851.

“DEARMADAM — I received yesterday, by private messenger, your obliging note, in which you direct me to communicate with you through the post only, as long as there is reason to believe that any visitors who may come to you are likely to be observed. May I be permitted to say that I look forward with respectful anxiety to the time when I shall again enjoy the only real happiness I have ever experienced — the happiness of personally addressing you?

“In compliance with your desire that I should not allow this day (the Sunday) to pass without privately noticing what went on at the great house, I took the keys, and went this morning to the steward’s office. I accounted for my appearance to the servants by informing them that I had work to do which it was important to complete in the shortest possible time. The same excuse would have done for Mr. Armadale if we had met, but no such meeting happened.

“Although I was at Thorpe Ambrose in what I thought good time, I was too late to see or hear anything myself of a serious quarrel which appeared to have taken place, just before I arrived, between Mr. Armadale and Mr. Midwinter.

“All the little information I can give you in this matter is derived from one of the servants. The man told me that he heard the voices of the two gentlemen loud in Mr. Armadale’s sitting-room. He went in to announce breakfast shortly afterward, and found Mr. Midwinter in such a dreadful state of agitation that he had to be helped out of the room. The servant tried to take him upstairs to lie down and compose himself. He declined, saying he would wait a little first in one of the lower rooms, and begging that he might be left alone. The man had hardly got downstairs again when he heard the front door opened and closed. He ran back, and found that Mr. Midwinter was gone. The rain was pouring at the time, and thunder and lightning came soon afterward. Dreadful weather certainly to go out in. The servant thinks Mr. Midwinter’s mind was unsettled. I sincerely hope not. Mr. Midwinter is one of the few people I have met with in the course of my life who have treated me kindly.

“Hearing that Mr. Armadale still remained in the sitting-room, I went into the steward’s office (which, as you may remember, is on the same side of the house), and left the door ajar, and set the window open, waiting and listening for anything that might happen. Dear madam, there was a time when I might have thought such a position in

the house of my employer not a very becoming one. Let me hasten to assure you that this is far from being my feeling now. I glory in any position which makes me serviceable to you.

"The state of the weather seemed hopelessly adverse to that renewal of intercourse between Mr. Armadale and Miss Milroy which you so confidently anticipate, and of which you are so anxious to be made aware. Strangely enough, however, it is actually in consequence of the state of the weather that I am now in a position to give you the very information you require. Mr. Armadale and Miss Milroy met about an hour since. The circumstances were as follows:

"Just at the beginning of the thunder-storm, I saw one of the grooms run across from the stables, and heard him tap at his master's window. Mr. Armadale opened the window and asked what was the matter. The groom said he came with a message from the coachman's wife. She had seen from her room over the stables (which looks on to the park) Miss Milroy quite alone, standing for shelter under one of the trees. As that part of the park was at some distance from the major's cottage, she had thought that her master might wish to send and ask the young lady into the house — especially as she had placed herself, with a thunder-storm coming on, in what might turn out to be a very dangerous position.

"The moment Mr. Armadale understood the man's message, he called for the water-proof things and the umbrellas, and ran out himself, instead of leaving it to the ser-

vants. In a little time he and the groom came back with Miss Milroy between them, as well protected as could be from the rain.

"I ascertained from one of the women-servants, who had taken the young lady into a bedroom, and had supplied her with such dry things as she wanted, that Miss Milroy had been afterward shown into the drawing-room, and that Mr. Armadale was there with her. The only way of following your instructions, and finding out what passed between them, was to go round the house in the pelting rain, and get into the conservatory (which opens into the drawing-room) by the outer door. I hesitate at nothing, dear madam, in your service; I would cheerfully get wet every day, to please you. Besides, though I may at first sight be thought rather an elderly man, a wetting is of no very serious consequence to me. I assure you I am not so old as I look, and I am of a stronger constitution than appears.

"It was impossible for me to get near enough in the conservatory to see what went on in the drawing-room, without the risk of being discovered. But most of the conversation reached me, except when they dropped their voices. This is the substance of what I heard:

"I gathered that Miss Milroy had been prevailed on, against her will, to take refuge from the thunder-storm in Mr. Armadale's house. She said so, at least, and she gave two reasons. The first was that her father had forbidden all intercourse between the cottage and the great house. Mr. Armadale met this objection by declaring that her father had issued his orders under a total misconception of the

truth, and by entreating her not to treat him as cruelly as the major had treated him. He entered, I suspect, into some explanations at this point, but as he dropped his voice I am unable to say what they were. His language, when I did hear it, was confused and ungrammatical. It seemed, however, to be quite intelligible enough to persuade Miss Milroy that her father had been acting under a mistaken impression of the circumstances. At least, I infer this; for, when I next heard the conversation, the young lady was driven back to her second objection to being in the house — which was, that Mr. Armadale had behaved very badly to her, and that he richly deserved that she should never speak to him again.

“In this latter case, Mr. Armadale attempted no defense of any kind. He agreed with her that he had behaved badly; he agreed with her that he richly deserved she should never speak to him again. At the same time he implored her to remember that he had suffered his punishment already. He was disgraced in the neighborhood; and his dearest friend, his one intimate friend in the world, had that very morning turned against him like the rest. Far or near, there was not a living creature whom he was fond of to comfort him, or to say a friendly word to him. He was lonely and miserable, and his heart ached for a little kindness — and that was his only excuse for asking Miss Milroy to forget and forgive the past.

“I must leave you, I fear, to judge for yourself of the effect of this on the young lady; for, though I tried hard, I failed to catch what she said. I am almost certain I heard

her crying, and Mr. Armadale entreating her not to break his heart. They whispered a great deal, which aggravated me. I was afterward alarmed by Mr. Armadale coming out into the conservatory to pick some flowers. He did not come as far, fortunately, as the place where I was hidden; and he went in again into the drawing-room, and there was more talking (I suspect at close quarters), which to my great regret I again failed to catch. Pray forgive me for having so little to tell you. I can only add that, when the storm cleared off, Miss Milroy went away with the flowers in her hand, and with Mr. Armadale escorting her from the house. My own humble opinion is that he had a powerful friend at court, all through the interview, in the young lady's own liking for him.

"This is all I can say at present, with the exception of one other thing I heard, which I blush to mention. But your word is law, and you have ordered me to have no concealments from you.

"Their talk turned once, dear madam, on yourself. I think I heard the word 'creature' from Miss Milroy; and I am certain that Mr. Armadale, while acknowledging that he had once admired you, added that circumstances had since satisfied him of 'his folly.' I quote his own expression; it made me quite tremble with indignation. If I may be permitted to say so, the man who admires Miss Gwilt lives in Paradise. Respect, if nothing else, ought to have closed Mr. Armadale's lips. He is my employer, I know; but after his calling it an act of folly to admire you (though I am his deputy-steward), I utterly despise him.

"Trusting that I may have been so happy as to give you satisfaction thus far, and earnestly desirous to deserve the honor of your continued confidence in me, I remain, dear madam,

"Your grateful and devoted servant,

"FELIX BASHWOOD."

2. From Mrs. Oldershaw to Miss Gwilt.

"Diana Street, Monday, July 21st.

"MY DEAR LYDIA — I trouble you with a few lines. They are written under a sense of the duty which I owe to myself, in our present position toward each other.

"I am not at all satisfied with the tone of your last two letters; and I am still less pleased at your leaving me this morning without any letter at all — and this when we had arranged, in the doubtful state of our prospects, that I was to hear from you every day. I can only interpret your conduct in one way. I can only infer that matters at Thorpe Ambrose, having been all mismanaged, are all going wrong.

"It is not my present object to reproach you, for why should I waste time, language, and paper? I merely wish to recall to your memory certain considerations which you appear to be disposed to overlook. Shall I put them in the plainest English? Yes; for, with all my faults, I am frankness personified.

"In the first place, then, I have an interest in your becoming Mrs. Armadale of Thorpe Ambrose as well as you. Secondly, I have provided you (to say nothing of good ad-

vice) with all the money needed to accomplish our object. Thirdly, I hold your notes of hand, at short dates, for every farthing so advanced. Fourthly and lastly, though I am indulgent to a fault in the capacity of a friend — in the capacity of a woman of business, my dear, I am not to be trifled with. That is all, Lydia, at least for the present.

“Pray don’t suppose I write in anger; I am only sorry and disheartened. My state of mind resembles David’s. If I had the wings of a dove, I would flee away and be at rest.

“Affectionately yours,

MARIA OLDERSHAW.”

3. From Mr. Basbwood to Miss Gwilt.

“Thorpe Ambrose, July 21st.

“DEAR MADAM — You will probably receive these lines a few hours after my yesterday’s communication reaches you. I posted my first letter last night, and I shall post this before noon to-day.

“My present object in writing is to give you some more news from this house. I have the inexpressible happiness of announcing that Mr. Armadale’s disgraceful intrusion on your privacy is at an end. The watch set on your actions is to be withdrawn this day. I write, dear madam, with the tears in my eyes — tears of joy, caused by feelings which I ventured to express in my previous letter (see first paragraph toward the end). Pardon me this personal reference. I can speak to you (I don’t know why) so much more readily with my pen than with my tongue.

"Let me try to compose myself, and proceed with my narrative.

"I had just arrived at the steward's office this morning, when Mr. Pedgift the elder followed me to the great house to see Mr. Armadale by special appointment. It is needless to say that I at once suspended any little business there was to do, feeling that your interests might possibly be concerned. It is also most gratifying to add that this time circumstances favored me. I was able to stand under the open window and to hear the whole interview.

"Mr. Armadale explained himself at once in the plainest terms. He gave orders that the person who had been hired to watch you should be instantly dismissed. On being asked to explain this sudden change of purpose, he did not conceal that it was owing to the effect produced on his mind by what had passed between Mr. Midwinter and himself on the previous day. Mr. Midwinter's language, cruelly unjust as it was, had nevertheless convinced him that no necessity whatever could excuse any proceeding so essentially base in itself as the employment of a spy, and on that conviction he was now determined to act.

"But for your own positive directions to me to conceal nothing that passes here in which your name is concerned, I should really be ashamed to report what Mr. Pedgift said on his side. He has behaved kindly to me, I know. But if he was my own brother, I could never forgive him the tone in which he spoke of you, and the obstinacy with which he tried to make Mr. Armadale change his mind.

“He began by attacking Mr. Midwinter. He declared that Mr. Midwinter’s opinion was the very worst opinion that could be taken; for it was quite plain that you, dear madam, had twisted him round your finger. Producing no effect by this coarse suggestion (which nobody who knows you could for a moment believe), Mr. Pedgift next referred to Miss Milroy, and asked Mr. Armadale if he had given up all idea of protecting her. What this meant I cannot imagine. I can only report it for your private consideration. Mr. Armadale briefly answered that he had his own plan for protecting Miss Milroy, and that the circumstances were altered in that quarter, or words to a similar effect. Still Mr. Pedgift persisted. He went on (I blush to mention) from bad to worse. He tried to persuade Mr. Armadale next to bring an action at law against one or other of the persons who had been most strongly condemning his conduct in the neighborhood, for the purpose — I really hardly know how to write it — of getting you into the witness-box. And worse yet: when Mr. Armadale still said No, Mr. Pedgift, after having, as I suspected by the sound of his voice, been on the point of leaving the room, artfully came back, and proposed sending for a detective officer from London, simply to look at you. ‘The whole of this mystery about Miss Gwilt’s true character,’ he said, ‘may turn on a question of identity. It won’t cost much to have a man down from London; and it’s worth trying whether her face is or is not known at headquarters to the police.’ I again and again assure you, dearest lady, that I only repeat those abomina-

ble words from a sense of duty toward yourself. I shook — I declare I shook from head to foot when I heard them.

“To resume, for there is more to tell you.

“Mr. Armadale (to his credit — I don't deny it, though I don't like him) still said No. He appeared to be getting irritated under Mr. Pedgift's persistence, and he spoke in a somewhat hasty way. ‘You persuaded me on the last occasion when we talked about this,’ he said, ‘to do something that I have been since heartily ashamed of. You won't succeed in persuading me, Mr. Pedgift, a second time.’ Those were his words. Mr. Pedgift took him up short; Mr. Pedgift seemed to be nettled on his side.

“‘If that is the light in which you see my advice, sir,’ he said, ‘the less you have of it for the future, the better. Your character and position are publicly involved in this matter between yourself and Miss Gwilt; and you persist, at a most critical moment, in taking a course of your own, which I believe will end badly. After what I have already said and done in this very serious case, I can't consent to go on with it with both my hands tied, and I can't drop it with credit to myself while I remain publicly known as your solicitor. You leave me no alternative, sir, but to resign the honor of acting as your legal adviser.’ ‘I am sorry to hear it,’ says Mr. Armadale, ‘but I have suffered enough already through interfering with Miss Gwilt. I can't and won't stir any further in the matter.’ ‘You may not stir any further in it, sir,’ says Mr. Pedgift, ‘and I shall not stir any further in it, for it has ceased to be a question of professional interest to me. But mark my words, Mr. Armadale, you are not at the end of this business yet. Some other person's curiosity may go on from the point where you

(and I) have stopped; and some other person's hand may let the broad daylight in yet on Miss Gwilt.'

"I report their language, dear madam, almost word for word, I believe, as I heard it. It produced an indescribable impression on me; it filled me, I hardly know why, with quite a panic of alarm. I don't at all understand it, and I understand still less what happened immediately afterward.

"Mr. Pedgift's voice, when he said those last words, sounded dreadfully close to me. He must have been speaking at the open window, and he must, I fear, have seen me under it. I had time, before he left the house, to get out quietly from among the laurels, but not to get back to the office. Accordingly I walked away along the drive toward the lodge, as if I was going on some errand connected with the steward's business.

"Before long, Mr. Pedgift overtook me in his gig, and stopped. 'So you feel some curiosity about Miss Gwilt, do you?' he said. 'Gratify your curiosity by all means; I don't object to it.' I felt naturally nervous, but I managed to ask him what he meant. He didn't answer; he only looked down at me from the gig in a very odd manner, and laughed. 'I have known stranger things happen even than that!' he said to himself suddenly, and drove off.

"I have ventured to trouble you with this last incident, though it may seem of no importance in your eyes, in the hope that your superior ability may be able to explain it. My own poor faculties, I confess, are quite unable to penetrate Mr. Pedgift's meaning. All I know is that he has no right to accuse me of any such impertinent feeling as cu-

riosity in relation to a lady whom I ardently esteem and admire. I dare not put it in warmer words.

"I have only to add that I am in a position to be of continued service to you here if you wish it. Mr. Armadale has just been into the office, and has told me briefly that, in Mr. Midwinter's continued absence, I am still to act as steward's deputy till further notice.

"Believe me, dear madam, anxiously and devotedly yours,

FELIX BASHWOOD."

4. From Allan Armadale to the Reverend Decimus Brock.

Thorpe Ambrose, Tuesday.

"MY DEAR MR. BROCK — I am in sad trouble. Midwinter has quarreled with me and left me; and my lawyer has quarreled with me and left me; and (except dear little Miss Milroy, who has forgiven me) all the neighbors have turned their backs on me. There is a good deal about 'me' in this, but I can't help it. I am very miserable alone in my own house. Do pray come and see me! You are the only old friend I have left, and I do long so to tell you about it.

"N. B. — On my word of honor as a gentleman, I am not to blame. Yours affectionately,

"ALLAN ARMADALE.

"P. S. — I would come to you (for this place is grown quite hateful to me), but I have a reason for not going too far away from Miss Milroy just at present."

5. From Robert Stapleton to Allan Armadale, Esq.

“Bascombe Rectory, Thursday Morning.

“RESPECTED SIR — I see a letter in your writing, on the table along with the others, which I am sorry to say my master is not well enough to open. He is down with a sort of low fever. The doctor says it has been brought on with worry and anxiety which master was not strong enough to bear. This seems likely; for I was with him when he went to London last month, and what with his own business, and the business of looking after that person who afterward gave us the slip, he was worried and anxious all the time; and for the matter of that, so was I.

“My master was talking of you a day or two since. He seemed unwilling that you should know of his illness, unless he got worse. But I think you ought to know of it. At the same time he is not worse; perhaps a trifle better. The doctor says he must be kept very quiet, and not agitated on any account. So be pleased to take no notice of this — I mean in the way of coming to the rectory. I have the doctor’s orders to say it is not needful, and it would only upset my master in the state he is in now.

“I will write again if you wish it. Please accept of my duty, and believe me to remain, sir, your humble servant,

“ROBERT STAPLETON.

“P. S. — The yacht has been rigged and repainted, waiting your orders. She looks beautiful.”

6. From Mrs. Oldershaw to Miss Gwilt.

"Diana Street, July 24th.

"MISS GWILT — The post hour has passed for three mornings following, and has brought me no answer to my letter. Are you purposely bent on insulting me? or have you left Thorpe Ambrose? In either case, I won't put up with your conduct any longer. The law shall bring you to book, if I can't.

"Your first note of hand (for thirty pounds) falls due on Tuesday next, the 29th. If you had behaved with common consideration toward me, I would have let you renew it with pleasure. As things are, I shall have the note presented; and, if it is not paid, I shall instruct my man of business to take the usual course.

*"Yours,
MARIA OLDERSHAW."*

7. From Miss Gwilt to Mrs. Oldershaw.

"5 Paradise Place, Thorpe Ambrose, July 25th.

"MRS. OLDERSHAW — The time of your man of business being, no doubt, of some value, I write a line to assist him when he takes the usual course. He will find me waiting to be arrested in the first-floor apartments, at the above address. In my present situation, and with my present thoughts, the best service you can possibly render me is to lock me up.

"L. G."

8. From Mrs. Oldersbaw to Miss Gwilt.

"Diana Street, July 26th.

"MY DARLING LYDIA — The longer I live in this wicked world the more plainly I see that women's own tempers are the worst enemies women have to contend with. What a truly regretful style of correspondence we have fallen into! What a sad want of self-restraint, my dear, on your side and on mine!

"Let me, as the oldest in years, be the first to make the needful excuses, the first to blush for my own want of self-control. Your cruel neglect, Lydia, stung me into writing as I did. I am so sensitive to ill treatment, when it is inflicted on me by a person whom I love and admire; and, though turned sixty, I am still (unfortunately for myself) so young at heart. Accept my apologies for having made use of my pen, when I ought to have been content to take refuge in my pocket-handkerchief. Forgive your attached Maria for being still young at heart!

"But oh, my dear — though I own I threatened you — how hard of you to take me at my word! How cruel of you, if your debt had been ten times what it is, to suppose me capable (whatever I might say) of the odious inhumanity of arresting my bosom friend! Heavens! have I deserved to be taken at my word in this unmercifully exact way, after the years of tender intimacy that have united us? But I don't complain; I only mourn over the frailty of our common human nature. Let us expect as little of each other as possible, my dear; we are both women, and we can't help it. I declare, when I reflect on the origin of our unfortunate

sex — when I remember that we were all originally made of no better material than the rib of a man (and that rib of so little importance to its possessor that he never appears to have missed it afterward), I am quite astonished at our virtues, and not in the least surprised at our faults.

“I am wandering a little; I am losing myself in serious thought, like that sweet character in Shakespeare who was ‘fancy free.’ One last word, dearest, to say that my longing for an answer to this proceeds entirely from my wish to hear from you again in your old friendly tone, and is quite unconnected with any curiosity to know what you are doing at Thorpe Ambrose — except such curiosity as you yourself might approve. Need I add that I beg you as a favor to me to renew, on the customary terms? I refer to the little bill due on Tuesday next, and I venture to suggest that day six weeks.

“Yours, with a truly motherly feeling,

“MARIA OLDERSHAW.”

9. From Miss Gwilt to Mrs. Oldershaw.

“Paradise Place, July 27th.

“I have just got your last letter. The brazen impudence of it has roused me. I am to be treated like a child, am I? — to be threatened first, and then, if threatening fails, to be coaxed afterward? You shall coax me; you shall know, my motherly friend, the sort of child you have to deal with.

“I had a reason, Mrs. Oldershaw, for the silence which has so seriously offended you. I was afraid — actually afraid — to let you into the secret of my thoughts. No such

fear troubles me now. My only anxiety this morning is to make you my best acknowledgments for the manner in which you have written to me. After carefully considering it, I think the worst turn I can possibly do you is to tell you what you are burning to know. So here I am at my desk, bent on telling it. If you don't bitterly repent, when you are at the end of this letter, not having held to your first resolution, and locked me up out of harm's way while you had the chance, my name is not Lydia Gwilt.

"Where did my last letter end? I don't remember, and don't care. Make it out as you can — I am not going back any further than this day week. That is to say, Sunday last.

"There was a thunder-storm in the morning. It began to clear off toward noon. I didn't go out: I waited to see Midwinter or to hear from him. (Are you surprised at my not writing 'Mr.' before his name? We have got so familiar, my dear, that 'Mr.' would be quite out of place.) He had left me the evening before, under very interesting circumstances. I had told him that his friend Armadale was persecuting me by means of a hired spy. He had declined to believe it, and had gone straight to Thorpe Ambrose to clear the thing up. I let him kiss my hand before he went. He promised to come back the next day (the Sunday). I felt I had secured my influence over him; and I believed he would keep his word.

"Well, the thunder passed away as I told you. The weather cleared up; the people walked out in their best clothes; the dinners came in from the bakers; I sat dream-

ing at my wretched little hired piano, nicely dressed and looking my best — and still no Midwinter appeared. It was late in the afternoon, and I was beginning to feel offended, when a letter was brought to me. It had been left by a strange messenger who went away again immediately. I looked at the letter. Midwinter at last — in writing, instead of in person. I began to feel more offended than ever; for, as I told you, I thought I had used my influence over him to better purpose.

“The letter, when I read it, set my mind off in a new direction. It surprised, it puzzled, it interested me. I thought, and thought, and thought of him, all the rest of the day.

“He began by asking my pardon for having doubted what I told him. Mr. Armadale’s own lips had confirmed me. They had quarreled (as I had anticipated they would); and he, and the man who had once been his dearest friend on earth, had parted forever. So far, I was not surprised. I was amused by his telling me in his extravagant way that he and his friend were parted forever; and I rather wondered what he would think when I carried out my plan, and found my way into the great house on pretense of reconciling them.

“But the second part of the letter set me thinking. Here it is, in his own words.

“It is only by struggling against myself (and no language can say how hard the struggle has been) that I have decided on writing, instead of speaking to you. A merciless necessity claims my future life. I must leave Thorpe Ambrose, I must leave England, without hesitating, without

stopping to look back. There are reasons — terrible reasons, which I have madly trifled with — for my never letting Mr. Armadale set eyes on me, or hear of me again, after what has happened between us. I must go, never more to live under the same roof, never more to breathe the same air with that man. I must hide myself from him under an assumed name; I must put the mountains and the seas between us. I have been warned as no human creature was ever warned before. I believe — I dare not tell you why — I believe that, if the fascination you have for me draws me back to you, fatal consequences will come of it to the man whose life has been so strangely mingled with your life and mine — the man who was once your admirer and my friend. And yet, feeling this, seeing it in my mind as plainly as I see the sky above my head, there is a weakness in me that still shrinks from the one imperative sacrifice of never seeing you again. I am fighting with it as a man fights with the strength of his despair. I have been near enough, not an hour since, to see the house where you live, and have forced myself away again out of sight of it. Can I force myself away further still, now that my letter is written — now, when the useless confession escapes me, and I own to loving you with the first love I have ever known, with the last love I shall ever feel? Let the coming time answer the question; I dare not write of it or think of it more.”

“Those were the last words. In that strange way the letter ended.

“I felt a perfect fever of curiosity to know what he meant. His loving me, of course, was easy enough to un-

derstand. But what did he mean by saying he had been warned? Why was he never to live under the same roof, never to breathe the same air again, with young Armadale? What sort of quarrel could it be which obliged one man to hide himself from another under an assumed name, and to put the mountains and the seas between them? Above all, if he came back, and let me fascinate him, why should it be fatal to the hateful lout who possesses the noble fortune and lives in the great house?

"I never longed in my life as I longed to see him again and put these questions to him. I got quite superstitious about it as the day drew on. They gave me a sweet-bread and a cherry pudding for dinner. I actually tried if he would come back by the stones in the plate! He will, he won't, he will, he won't — and so on. It ended in 'He won't.' I rang the bell, and had the things taken away. I contradicted Destiny quite fiercely. I said, 'He will!' and I waited at home for him.

"You don't know what a pleasure it is to me to give you all these little particulars. Count up — my bosom friend, my second mother — count up the money you have advanced on the chance of my becoming Mrs. Armadale, and then think of my feeling this breathless interest in another man. Oh, Mrs. Oldershaw, how intensely I enjoy the luxury of irritating you!

"The day got on toward evening. I rang again, and sent down to borrow a railway time-table. What trains were there to take him away on Sunday? The national respect for the Sabbath stood my friend. There was only one train, which

had started hours before he wrote to me. I went and consulted my glass. It paid me the compliment of contradicting the divination by cherry-stones. My glass said: 'Get behind the window-curtain; he won't pass the long lonely evening without coming back again to look at the house.' I got behind the window-curtain, and waited with his letter in my hand.

"The dismal Sunday light faded, and the dismal Sunday quietness in the street grew quieter still. The dusk came, and I heard a step coming with it in the silence. My heart gave a little jump — only think of my having any heart left! I said to myself: 'Midwinter!' And Midwinter it was.

"When he came in sight he was walking slowly, stopping and hesitating at every two or three steps. My ugly little drawing-room window seemed to be beckoning him on in spite of himself. After waiting till I saw him come to a standstill, a little aside from the house, but still within view of my irresistible window, I put on my things and slipped out by the back way into the garden. The landlord and his family were at supper, and nobody saw me. I opened the door in the wall, and got round by the lane into the street. At that awkward moment I suddenly remembered, what I had forgotten before, the spy set to watch me, who was, no doubt, waiting somewhere in sight of the house.

"It was necessary to get time to think, and it was (in my state of mind) impossible to let Midwinter go without speaking to him. In great difficulties you generally decide at once, if you decide at all. I decided to make an appointment with him for the next evening, and to consider in the interval how to manage the interview so that it might

escape observation. This, as I felt at the time, was leaving my own curiosity free to torment me for four-and-twenty mortal hours; but what other choice had I? It was as good as giving up being mistress of Thorpe Ambrose altogether, to come to a private understanding with Midwinter in the sight and possibly in the bearing of Armadale's spy.

"Finding an old letter of yours in my pocket, I drew back into the lane, and wrote on the blank leaf, with the little pencil that hangs at my watch-chain: 'I must and will speak to you. It is impossible to-night, but be in the street to-morrow at this time, and leave me afterward forever, if you like. When you have read this, overtake me, and say as you pass, without stopping or looking round, "Yes, I promise."' "

"I folded up the paper, and came on him suddenly from behind. As he started and turned round, I put the note into his hand, pressed his hand, and passed on. Before I had taken ten steps I heard him behind me. I can't say he didn't look round — I saw his big black eyes, bright and glittering in the dusk, devour me from head to foot in a moment; but otherwise he did what I told him. 'I can deny you nothing,' he whispered; 'I promise.' He went on and left me. I couldn't help thinking at the time how that brute and booby Armadale would have spoiled everything in the same situation.

"I tried hard all night to think of a way of making our interview of the next evening safe from discovery, and tried in vain. Even as early as this, I began to feel as if Midwinter's letter had, in some unaccountable manner, stupefied me.

“Monday morning made matters worse. News came from my faithful ally, Mr. Bashwood, that Miss Milroy and Armadale had met and become friends again. You may fancy the state I was in! An hour or two later there came more news from Mr. Bashwood — good news this time. The mischievous idiot at Thorpe Ambrose had shown sense enough at last to be ashamed of himself. He had decided on withdrawing the spy that very day, and he and his lawyer had quarreled in consequence.

“So here was the obstacle which I was too stupid to remove for myself obligingly removed for me! No more need to fret about the coming interview with Midwinter; and plenty of time to consider my next proceedings, now that Miss Milroy and her precious swain had come together again. Would you believe it, the letter, or the man himself (I don’t know which), had taken such a hold on me that, though I tried and tried, I could think of nothing else; and this when I had every reason to fear that Miss Milroy was in a fair way of changing her name to Armadale, and when I knew that my heavy debt of obligation to her was not paid yet? Was there ever such perversity? I can’t account for it; can you?

“The dusk of the evening came at last. I looked out of the window — and there he was!

“I joined him at once; the people of the house, as before, being too much absorbed in their eating and drinking to notice anything else. ‘We mustn’t be seen together here,’ I whispered. ‘I must go on first, and you must follow me.’

“He said nothing in the way of reply. What was going on in his mind I can’t pretend to guess; but, after coming to

his appointment, he actually hung back as if he was half inclined to go away again.

"You look as if you were afraid of me," I said.

"I am afraid of you," he answered — 'of you, and of myself.'

"It was not encouraging; it was not complimentary. But I was in such a frenzy of curiosity by this time that, if he had been ruder still, I should have taken no notice of it. I led the way a few steps toward the new buildings, and stopped and looked round after him.

"Must I ask it of you as a favor," I said, 'after your giving me your promise, and after such a letter as you have written to me?'

"Something suddenly changed him; he was at my side in an instant. 'I beg your pardon, Miss Gwilt; lead the way where you please.' He dropped back a little after that answer, and I heard him say to himself, 'What is to be will be. What have I to do with it, and what has she?'

"It could hardly have been the words, for I didn't understand them — it must have been the tone he spoke in, I suppose, that made me feel a momentary tremor. I was half inclined, without the ghost of a reason for it, to wish him good-night, and go in again. Not much like me, you will say. Not much, indeed! It didn't last a moment. Your darling Lydia soon came to her senses again.

"I led the way toward the unfinished cottages, and the country beyond. It would have been much more to my taste to have had him into the house, and have talked to him in the light of the candles. But I had risked it once

already; and in this scandal-mongering place, and in my critical position, I was afraid to risk it again. The garden was not to be thought of either, for the landlord smokes his pipe there after his supper. There was no alternative but to take him away from the town.

"From time to time, I looked back as I went on. There he was, always at the same distance, dim and ghost-like in the dusk, silently following me.

"I must leave off for a little while. The church bells have broken out, and the jangling of them drives me mad. In these days, when we have all got watches and clocks, why are bells wanted to remind us when the service begins? We don't require to be rung into the theater. How excessively discreditable to the clergy to be obliged to ring us into the church!"

— — — — —

"They have rung the congregation in at last; and I can take up my pen, and go on again.

"I was a little in doubt where to lead him to. The high-road was on one side of me; but, empty as it looked, somebody might be passing when we least expected it. The other way was through the coppice. I led him through the coppice.

"At the outskirts of the trees, on the other side, there was a dip in the ground with some felled timber lying on it, and a little pool beyond, still and white and shining in the twilight. The long grazing-grounds rose over its further shore, with the mist thickening on them, and a dim black line far away of cattle in slow procession going home. There wasn't a living creature near; there wasn't a sound to be heard. I

sat down on one of the felled trees and looked back for him. 'Come,' I said, softly — 'come and sit by me here.'

"Why am I so particular about all this? I hardly know. The place made an unaccountably vivid impression on me, and I can't help writing about it. If I end badly — suppose we say on the scaffold? — I believe the last thing I shall see, before the hangman pulls the drop, will be the little shining pool, and the long, misty grazing-grounds, and the cattle winding dimly home in the thickening night. Don't be alarmed, you worthy creature! My fancies play me strange tricks sometimes; and there is a little of last night's laudanum, I dare say, in this part of my letter.

"He came — in the strangest silent way, like a man walking in his sleep — he came and sat down by me. Either the night was very close, or I was by this time literally in a fever: I couldn't bear my bonnet on; I couldn't bear my gloves. The want to look at him, and see what his singular silence meant, and the impossibility of doing it in the darkening light, irritated my nerves, till I thought I should have screamed. I took his hand, to try if that would help me. It was burning hot; and it closed instantly on mine — you know how. Silence, after that, was not to be thought of. The one safe way was to begin talking to him at once.

"Don't despise me,' I said. 'I am obliged to bring you to this lonely place; I should lose my character if we were seen together.'

"I waited a little. His hand warned me once more not to let the silence continue. I determined to make him speak to me this time.

"You have interested me, and frightened me," I went on. "You have written me a very strange letter. I must know what it means."

"It is too late to ask. You have taken the way, and I have taken the way, from which there is no turning back." He made that strange answer in a tone that was quite new to me — a tone that made me even more uneasy than his silence had made me the moment before. "Too late," he repeated — "too late! There is only one question to ask me now."

"What is it?"

"As I said the words, a sudden trembling passed from his hand to mine, and told me instantly that I had better have held my tongue. Before I could move, before I could think, he had me in his arms. 'Ask me if I love you,' he whispered. At the same moment his head sank on my bosom; and some unutterable torture that was in him burst its way out, as it does with us, in a passion of sobs and tears.

"My first impulse was the impulse of a fool. I was on the point of making our usual protest and defending myself in our usual way. Luckily or unluckily, I don't know which, I have lost the fine edge of the sensitiveness of youth; and I checked the first movement of my hands, and the first word on my lips. Oh, dear, how old I felt, while he was sobbing his heart out on my breast! How I thought of the time when he might have possessed himself of my love! All he had possessed himself of now was — my waist.

"I wonder whether I pitied him? It doesn't matter if I did. At any rate, my hand lifted itself somehow, and my

fingers twined themselves softly in his hair. Horrible recollections came back to me of other times, and made me shudder as I touched him. And yet I did it. What fools women are!

"I won't reproach you," I said, gently. "I won't say this is a cruel advantage to take of me, in such a position as mine. You are dreadfully agitated; I will let you wait a little and compose yourself."

"Having got as far as that, I stopped to consider how I should put the questions to him that I was burning to ask. But I was too confused, I suppose, or perhaps too impatient to consider. I let out what was uppermost in my mind, in the words that came first.

"I don't believe you love me," I said. "You write strange things to me; you frighten me with mysteries. What did you mean by saying in your letter that it would be fatal to Mr. Armadale if you came back to me? What danger can there be to Mr. Armadale —?"

"Before I could finish the question, he suddenly lifted his head and unclasped his arms. I had apparently touched some painful subject which recalled him to himself. Instead of my shrinking from him, it was he who shrank from me. I felt offended with him; why, I don't know — but offended I was; and I thanked him with my bitterest emphasis for remembering what was due to me, at last!

"Do you believe in Dreams?" he burst out, in the most strangely abrupt manner, without taking the slightest notice of what I had said to him. "Tell me," he went on, without allowing me time to answer, "were you, or was any

relation of yours, ever connected with Allan Armadale's father or mother? Were you, or was anybody belonging to you, ever in the island of Madeira?

"Conceive my astonishment, if you can. I turned cold. In an instant I turned cold all over. He was plainly in the secret of what had happened when I was in Mrs. Armadale's service in Madeira — in all probability before he was born! That was startling enough of itself. And he had evidently some reason of his own for trying to connect me with those events — which was more startling still.

"No," I said, as soon as I could trust myself to speak. 'I know nothing of his father or mother.'

"And nothing of the island of Madeira?"

"Nothing of the island of Madeira."

"He turned his head away, and began talking to himself.

"Strange!" he said. 'As certainly as I was in the Shadow's place at the window, she was in the Shadow's place at the pool!'

"Under other circumstances, his extraordinary behavior might have alarmed me. But after his question about Madeira, there was some greater fear in me which kept all common alarm at a distance. I don't think I ever determined on anything in my life as I determined on finding out how he had got his information, and who he really was. It was quite plain to me that I had roused some hidden feeling in him by my question about Armadale, which was as strong in its way as his feeling for me. What had become of my influence over him?"

"I couldn't imagine what had become of it; but I could and did set to work to make him feel it again.

"Don't treat me cruelly," I said; "I didn't treat you cruelly just now. Oh, Mr. Midwinter, it's so lonely, it's so dark — don't frighten me!"

"Frighten you!" He was close to me again in a moment. 'Frighten you!' He repeated the word with as much astonishment as if I had woke him from a dream, and charged him with something that he had said in his sleep.

"It was on the tip of my tongue, finding how I had surprised him, to take him while he was off his guard, and to ask why my question about Armadale had produced such a change in his behavior to me. But after what had happened already, I was afraid to risk returning to the subject too soon. Something or other — what they call an instinct, I dare say — warned me to let Armadale alone for the present, and to talk to him first about himself. As I told you in one of my early letters, I had noticed signs and tokens in his manner and appearance which convinced me, young as he was, that he had done something or suffered something out of the common in his past life. I had asked myself more and more suspiciously every time I saw him whether he was what he appeared to be; and first and foremost among my other doubts was a doubt whether he was passing among us by his real name. Having secrets to keep about my own past life, and having gone myself in other days by more than one assumed name, I suppose I am all the readier to suspect other people when I find something mysterious about them. Any way, having the suspicion in

my mind, I determined to startle him, as he had startled me, by an unexpected question on my side — a question about his name.

“While I was thinking, he was thinking; and, as it soon appeared, of what I had just said to him. ‘I am so grieved to have frightened you,’ he whispered, with that gentleness and humility which we all so heartily despise in a man when he speaks to other women, and which we all so dearly like when he speaks to ourselves. ‘I hardly know what I have been saying,’ he went on; ‘my mind is miserably disturbed. Pray forgive me, if you can; I am not myself to-night.’

“‘I am not angry,’ I said; ‘I have nothing to forgive. We are both imprudent; we are both unhappy.’ I laid my head on his shoulder. ‘Do you really love me?’ I asked him, softly, in a whisper.

“His arm stole round me again; and I felt the quick beat of his heart get quicker and quicker. ‘If you only knew!’ he whispered back; ‘if you only knew — ‘ He could say no more. I felt his face bending toward mine, and dropped my head lower, and stopped him in the very act of kissing me.

“‘No,’ I said; ‘I am only a woman who has taken your fancy. You are treating me as if I was your promised wife.’

“‘Be my promised wife!’ he whispered, eagerly, and tried to raise my head. I kept it down. The horror of these old remembrances that you know of came back and made me tremble a little when he asked me to be his wife. I don’t think I was actually faint; but something like faint-

ness made me close my eyes. The moment I shut them, the darkness seemed to open as if lightning had split it; and the ghosts of those other men rose in the horrid gap, and looked at me.

"Speak to me!" he whispered, tenderly. "My darling, my angel, speak to me!"

"His voice helped me to recover myself. I had just sense enough left to remember that the time was passing, and that I had not put my question to him yet about his name.

"Suppose I felt for you as you feel for me?" I said. "Suppose I loved you dearly enough to trust you with the happiness of all my life to come?"

"I paused a moment to get my breath. It was unbearably still and close; the air seemed to have died when the night came.

"Would you be marrying me honorably," I went on, "if you married me in your present name?"

"His arm dropped from my waist, and I felt him give one great start. After that he sat by me, still, and cold, and silent, as if my question had struck him dumb. I put my arm round his neck, and lifted my head again on his shoulder. Whatever the spell was I had laid on him, my coming closer in that way seemed to break it.

"Who told you?" He stopped. "No," he went on, "nobody can have told you. What made you suspect —?" He stopped again.

"Nobody told me," I said; "and I don't know what made me suspect. Women have strange fancies sometimes. Is Midwinter really your name?"

"I can't deceive you," he answered, after another interval of silence; 'Midwinter is not really my name.'

"I nestled a little closer to him.

"What is your name?" I asked.

"He hesitated.

"I lifted my face till my cheek just touched his. I persisted, with my lips close at his ear:

"What, no confidence in me even yet! No confidence in the woman who has almost confessed she loves you — who has almost consented to be your wife!"

"He turned his face to mine. For the second time he tried to kiss me, and for the second time I stopped him.

"If I tell you my name," he said, 'I must tell you more.'

"I let my cheek touch his again.

"Why not?" I said. 'How can I love a man — much less marry him — if he keeps himself a stranger to me?'

"There was no answering that, as I thought. But he did answer it.

"It is a dreadful story," he said. 'It may darken all your life, if you know it, as it has darkened mine.'

"I put my other arm round him, and persisted. 'Tell it me; I'm not afraid; tell it me.'

"He began to yield to my other arm.

"Will you keep it a sacred secret?" he said. 'Never to be breathed — never to be known but to you and me?'

"I promised him it should be a secret. I waited in a perfect frenzy of expectation. Twice he tried to begin, and twice his courage failed him.

"I can't!" he broke out in a wild, helpless way. "I can't tell it!"

"My curiosity, or more likely my temper, got beyond all control. He had irritated me till I was reckless what I said or what I did. I suddenly clasped him close, and pressed my lips to his. 'I love you!' I whispered in a kiss. 'Now will you tell me?'"

"For the moment he was speechless. I don't know whether I did it purposely to drive him wild. I don't know whether I did it involuntarily in a burst of rage. Nothing is certain but that I interpreted his silence the wrong way. I pushed him back from me in a fury the instant after I had kissed him. 'I hate you!' I said. 'You have maddened me into forgetting myself. Leave me. I don't care for the darkness. Leave me instantly, and never see me again!'"

"He caught me by the hand and stopped me. He spoke in a new voice; he suddenly commanded, as only men can.

"'Sit down,' he said. 'You have given me back my courage — you shall know who I am.'"

"In the silence and the darkness all round us, I obeyed him, and sat down.

"In the silence and the darkness all round us, he took me in his arms again, and told me who he was."

— — — — —

"Shall I trust you with his story? Shall I tell you his real name? Shall I show you, as I threatened, the thoughts that have grown out of my interview with him and out of all that has happened to me since that time?"

“Or shall I keep his secret as I promised? and keep my own secret too, by bringing this weary, long letter to an end at the very moment when you are burning to hear more!

“Those are serious questions, Mrs. Oldershaw — more serious than you suppose. I have had time to calm down, and I begin to see, what I failed to see when I first took up my pen to write to you, the wisdom of looking at consequences. Have I frightened myself in trying to frighten you? It is possible — strange as it may seem, it is really possible.

“I have been at the window for the last minute or two, thinking. There is plenty of time for thinking before the post leaves. The people are only now coming out of church.

“I have settled to put my letter on one side, and to take a look at my diary. In plainer words I must see what I risk if I decide on trusting you; and my diary will show me what my head is too weary to calculate without help. I have written the story of my days (and sometimes the story of my nights) much more regularly than usual for the last week, having reasons of my own for being particularly careful in this respect under present circumstances. If I end in doing what it is now in my mind to do, it would be madness to trust to my memory. The smallest forgetfulness of the slightest event that has happened from the night of my interview with Midwinter to the present time might be utter ruin to me.

“Utter ruin to her!’ you will say. ‘What kind of ruin does she mean?’

“Wait a little, till I have asked my diary whether I can safely tell you.”

CHAPTER X

MISS GWILT'S DIARY

"July 21st, Monday night, eleven o'clock. — Midwinter has just left me. We parted by my desire at the path out of the cop-pice; he going his way to the hotel, and I going mine to my lodgings.

"I have managed to avoid making another appointment with him by arranging to write to him to-morrow morning. This gives me the night's interval to compose myself, and to coax my mind back (if I can) to my own affairs. Will the night pass, and the morning find me still thinking of the Letter that came to him from his father's deathbed? of the night he watched through on the Wrecked Ship; and, more than all, of the first breathless moment when he told me his real Name?

"Would it help me to shake off these impressions, I wonder, if I made the effort of writing them down? There would be no danger, in that case, of my forgetting anything important. And perhaps, after all, it may be the fear of forgetting something which I ought to remember that keeps this story of Midwinter's weighing as it does on my mind. At any rate, the experiment is worth trying. In my present situation I *must* be free to

think of other things, or I shall never find my way through all the difficulties at Thorpe Ambrose that are still to come.

“Let me think. What *haunts* me, to begin with?

“The Names haunt me. I keep saying and saying to myself Both alike! – Christian name and surname both alike! A light-haired Allan Armadale, whom I have long since known of, and who is the son of my old mistress. A dark-haired Allan Armadale, whom I only know of now, and who is only known to others under the name of Ozias Midwinter. Stranger still; it is not relationship, it is not chance, that has made them namesakes. The father of the light Armadale was the man who was *born* to the family name, and who lost the family inheritance. The father of the dark Armadale was the man who *took* the name, on condition of getting the inheritance – and who got it.

“So there are two of them – I can’t help thinking of it – both unmarried. The light-haired Armadale, who offers to the woman who can secure him, eight thousand a year while he lives; who leaves her twelve hundred a year when he dies; who must and shall marry me for those two golden reasons; and whom I hate and loathe as I never hated and loathed a man yet. And the dark-haired Armadale, who has a poor little income, which might perhaps pay his wife’s milliner, if his wife was careful; who has just left me, persuaded that I mean to marry him; and whom – well, whom I *might* have loved once, before I was the woman I am now.

“And Allan the Fair doesn’t know he has a namesake. And Allan the Dark has kept the secret from everybody but the Somersetshire clergyman (whose discretion he can depend on) and myself.

"And there are two Allan Armadales – two Allan Armadales – two Allan Armadales. There! three is a lucky number. Haunt me again, after that, if you can!

"What next? The murder in the timber ship? No; the murder is a good reason why the dark Armadale, whose father committed it, should keep his secret from the fair Armadale, whose father was killed; but it doesn't concern *me*. I remember there was a suspicion in Madeira at the time of something wrong. *Was* it wrong? *Was* the man who had been tricked out of his wife to blame for shutting the cabin door, and leaving the man who had tricked him to drown in the wreck? Yes; the woman wasn't worth it.

"What am I sure of that really concerns myself?

"I am sure of one very important thing. I am sure that Midwinter – I must call him by his ugly false name, or I may confuse the two Armadales before I have done – I am sure that Midwinter is perfectly ignorant that I and the little imp of twelve years old who waited on Mrs. Armadale in Madeira, and copied the letters that were supposed to arrive from the West Indies, are one and the same. There are not many girls of twelve who could have imitated a man's handwriting, and held their tongues about it afterward, as I did; but that doesn't matter now. What does matter is that Midwinter's belief in the Dream is Midwinter's only reason for trying to connect me with Allan Armadale, by associating me with Allan Armadale's father and mother. I asked him if he actually thought me old enough to have known either of them. And he said No, poor fellow, in the most innocent, bewildered way. Would he say No if he saw me now? Shall I turn to the glass and see if I look

my five-and-thirty years? or shall I go on writing? I will go on writing.

"There is one thing more that haunts me almost as obstinately as the Names.

"I wonder whether I am right in relying on Midwinter's superstition (as I do) to help me in keeping him at arms-length. After having let the excitement of the moment hurry me into saying more than I need have said, he is certain to press me; he is certain to come back, with a man's hateful selfishness and impatience in such things, to the question of marrying me. Will the Dream help me to check him? After alternately believing and disbelieving in it, he has got, by his own confession, to believing in it again. Can I say I believe in it, too? I have better reasons for doing so than he knows of. I am not only the person who helped Mrs. Armadale's marriage by helping her to impose on her own father: I am the woman who tried to drown herself; the woman who started the series of accidents which put young Armadale in possession of his fortune; the woman who has come Thorpe Ambrose to marry him for his fortune, now he has got it; and more extraordinary still, the woman who stood in the Shadow's place at the pool! These may be coincidences, but they are strange coincidences. I declare I begin to fancy that *I* believe in the Dream too!

"Suppose I say to him, 'I think as you think. I say what you said in your letter to me, Let us part before the harm is done. Leave me before the Third Vision of the Dream comes true. Leave me, and put the mountains and the seas between you and the man who bears your name!'

"Suppose, on the other side, that his love for me makes him reckless of everything else? Suppose he says those desperate words again, which I understand now: What *is* to be, *will* be. What have I to do with it, and what has she?" Suppose – suppose –

"I won't write any more. I hate writing. It doesn't relieve me – it makes me worse. I'm further from being able to think of all that I *must* think of than I was when I sat down. It is past midnight. To-morrow has come already; and here I am as helpless as the stupidest woman living! Bed is the only fit place for me.

"Bed? If it was ten years since, instead of to-day; and if I had married Midwinter for love, I might be going to bed now with nothing heavier on my mind than a visit on tiptoe to the nursery, and a last look at night to see if my children were sleeping quietly in their cribs. I wonder whether I should have loved my children if I had ever had any? Perhaps, yes – perhaps, no. It doesn't matter."

"Tuesday morning, ten o'clock. – Who was the man who invented laudanum? I thank him from the bottom of my heart whoever he was. If all the miserable wretches in pain of body and mind, whose comforter he has been, could meet together to sing his praises, what a chorus it would be! I have had six delicious hours of oblivion; I have woken up with my mind composed; I have written a perfect little letter to Midwinter; I have drunk my nice cup of tea, with a real relish of it; I have dawdled over my morning toilet with an exquisite sense of relief – and all through the modest little bottle of Drops, which I see on my bedroom chimney-piece at this moment. 'Drops,' you are a darling! If I love nothing else, I love *you*.

“My letter to Midwinter has been sent through the post; and I have told him to reply to me in the same manner.

“I feel no anxiety about his answer — he can only answer in one way. I have asked for a little time to consider, because my family circumstances require some consideration, in his interests as well as in mine. I have engaged to tell him what those circumstances are (what shall I say, I wonder?) when we next meet; and I have requested him in the meantime to keep all that has passed between us a secret for the present. As to what he is to do himself in the interval while I am supposed to be considering, I have left it to his own discretion — merely reminding him that his attempting to see me again (while our positions toward each other cannot be openly avowed) might injure my reputation. I have offered to write to him if he wishes it; and I have ended by promising to make the interval of our necessary separation as short as I can.

“This sort of plain, unaffected letter — which I might have written to him last night, if his story had not been running in my head as it did — has one defect, I know. It certainly keeps him out of the way, while I am casting my net, and catching my gold fish at the great house for the second time; but it also leaves an awkward day of reckoning to come with Midwinter if I succeed. How am I to manage him? What am I to do? I ought to face those two questions as boldly as usual; but somehow my courage seems to fail me, and I don't quite fancy meeting *that* difficulty, till the time comes when it *must* be met. Shall I confess to my diary that I am sorry for Midwinter, and that I shrink a little from thinking of the day when he hears that I am going to be mistress at the great house?

"But I am not mistress yet; and I can't take a step in the direction of the great house till I have got the answer to my letter, and till I know that Midwinter is out of the way. Patience! patience! I must go and forget myself at my piano. There is the 'Moonlight Sonata' open, and tempting me, on the music-stand. Have I nerve enough to play it, I wonder? Or will it set me shuddering with the mystery and terror of it, as it did the other day?"

"Five o'clock. — I have got his answer. The slightest request I can make is a command to him. He has gone; and he sends me his address in London. 'There are two considerations' (he says) 'which help to reconcile me to leaving you. The first is that *you* wish it, and that it is only to be for a little while. The second is that I think I can make some arrangements in London for adding to my income by my own labor. I have never cared for money for myself; but you don't know how I am beginning already to prize the luxuries and refinements that money can provide, for my wife's sake.' Poor fellow! I almost wish I had not written to him as I did; I almost wish I had not sent him away from me.

"Fancy if Mother Oldershaw saw this page in my diary! I have had a letter from her this morning — a letter to remind me of my obligations, and to tell me she suspects things are all going wrong. Let her suspect! I shan't trouble myself to answer; I can't be worried with that old wretch in the state I am in now.

"It is a lovely afternoon — I want a walk — I mustn't think of Midwinter. Suppose I put on my bonnet, and try my experiment at once at the great house? Everything is in my favor.

There is no spy to follow me, and no lawyer to keep me out, this time. Am I handsome enough, to-day? Well, yes; handsome enough to be a match for a little dowdy, awkward, freckled creature, who ought to be perched on a form at school, and strapped to a backboard to straighten her crooked shoulders.

*"The nursery lisps out in all they utter;
Besides, they always smell of bread-and-butter."*

"How admirably Byron has described girls in their teens!"

"Eight o'clock. — I have just got back from Armadale's house. I have seen him, and spoken to him; and the end of it may be set down in three plain words. I have failed. There is no more chance of my being Mrs. Armadale of Thorpe Ambrose than there is of my being Queen of England.

"Shall I write and tell Oldershaw? Shall I go back to London? Not till I have had time to think a little. Not just yet.

"Let me think; I have failed completely — failed, with all the circumstances in favor of success. I caught him alone on the drive in front of the house. He was excessively disconcerted, but at the same time quite willing to hear me. I tried him, first quietly — then with tears, and the rest of it. I introduced myself in the character of the poor innocent woman whom he had been the means of injuring. I confused, I interested, I convinced him. I went on to the purely Christian part of my errand, and spoke with such feeling of his separation from his friend, for which I was innocently responsible, that I turned his odious rosy face quite pale, and made him beg me at last not to distress him. But, whatever other feelings I roused in

him, I never once roused his old feeling for *me*. I saw it in his eyes when he looked at me; I felt it in his fingers when we shook hands. We parted friends, and nothing more.

"It is for this, is it, Miss Milroy, that I resisted temptation, morning after morning, when I knew you were out alone in the park? I have just left you time to slip in, and take my place in Armadale's good graces, have I? I never resisted temptation yet without suffering for it in some such way as this! If I had only followed my first thoughts, on the day when I took leave of you, my young lady – well, well, never mind that now. I have got the future before me; you are not Mrs. Armadale yet! And I can tell you one other thing – whoever else he marries, he will never marry *you*. If I am even with you in no other way, trust me, whatever comes of it, to be even with you there!

"I am not, to my own surprise, in one of my furious passions. The last time I was in this perfectly cool state, under serious provocation, something came of it, which I daren't write down, even in my own private diary. I shouldn't be surprised if something comes of it now.

"On my way back, I called at Mr. Bashwood's lodgings in the town. He was not at home, and I left a message telling him to come here to-night and speak to me. I mean to relieve him at once of the duty of looking after Armadale and Miss Milroy. I may not see my way yet to ruining her prospects at Thorpe Ambrose as completely as she has ruined mine. But when the time comes, and I do see it, I don't know to what lengths my sense of injury may take me; and there may be inconvenience, and possibly danger, in having such a chicken-hearted creature as Mr. Bashwood in my confidence.

"I suspect I am more upset by all this than I supposed. Mid-winter's story is beginning to haunt me again, without rhyme or reason.

"A soft, quick, trembling knock at the street door! I know who it is. No hand but old Bashwood's could knock in that way."

"Nine o'clock. — I have just got rid of him. He has surprised me by coming out in a new character.

"It seems (though I didn't detect him) that he was at the great house while I was in company with Armadale. He saw us talking on the drive, and he afterward heard what the servants said, who saw us too. The wise opinion below stairs is that we have 'made it up,' and that the master is likely to marry me after all. 'He's sweet on her red hair,' was the elegant expression they used in the kitchen. 'Little missie can't match her there; and little missie will get the worst of it.' How I hate the coarse ways of the lower orders!

"While old Bashwood was telling me this, I thought he looked even more confused and nervous than usual. But I failed to see what was really the matter until after I had told him that he was to leave all further observation of Mr. Armadale and Miss Milroy to me. Every drop of the little blood there is in the feeble old creature's body seemed to fly up into his face. He made quite an overpowering effort; he really looked as if he would drop down dead of fright at his own boldness; but he forced out the question for all that, stammering, and stuttering, and kneading desperately with both hands at the brim of his hideous great hat. 'I beg your pardon, Miss Gwi-Gwi-Gwilt! You are not really go-go-going to marry Mr. Armadale,

are you? Jealous – if ever I saw it in a man's face yet, I saw it in his – actually jealous of Armadale at his age! If I had been in the humor for it, I should have burst out laughing in his face. As it was, I was angry, and lost all patience with him. I told him he was an old fool, and ordered him to go on quietly with his usual business until I sent him word that he was wanted again. He submitted as usual; but there was an indescribable something in his watery old eyes, when he took leave of me, which I have never noticed in them before. Love has the credit of working all sorts of strange transformations. Can it be really possible that Love has made Mr. Bashwood man enough to be angry with me?

“Wednesday. – My experience of Miss Milroy's habits suggested a suspicion to me last night which I thought it desirable to clear up this morning.

“It was always her way, when I was at the cottage, to take a walk early in the morning before breakfast. Considering that I used often to choose that very time for *my* private meetings with Armadale, it struck me as likely that my former pupil might be taking a leaf out of my book, and that I might make some desirable discoveries if I turned my steps in the direction of the major's garden at the right hour. I deprived myself of my Drops, to make sure of waking; passed a miserable night in consequence; and was ready enough to get up at six o'clock, and walk the distance from my lodgings to the cottage in the fresh morning air.

“I had not been five minutes on the park side of the garden inclosure before I saw her come out.

"She seemed to have had a bad night too; her eyes were heavy and red, and her lips and cheeks looked swollen as if she had been crying. There was something on her mind, evidently; something, as it soon appeared, to take her out of the garden into the park. She walked (if one can call it walking; with such legs as hers!) straight to the summer house, and opened the door, and crossed the bridge, and went on quicker and quicker toward the low ground in the park, where the trees are thickest. I followed her over the open space with perfect impunity in the preoccupied state she was in; and, when she began to slacken her pace among the trees, I was among the trees too, and was not afraid of her seeing me.

"Before long, there was a crackling and trampling of heavy feet coming up toward us through the under-wood in a deep dip of the ground. I knew that step as well as she knew it. 'Here I am,' she said, in a faint little voice. I kept behind the trees a few yards off, in some doubt on which side Armadale would come out of the under-wood to join her. He came out up the side of the dell, opposite to the tree behind which I was standing. They sat down together on the bank. I sat down behind the tree, and looked at them through the under-wood, and heard without the slightest difficulty every word that they said.

"The talk began by his noticing that she looked out of spirits, and asking if anything had gone wrong at the cottage. The artful little minx lost no time in making the necessary impression on him; she began to cry. He took her hand, of course, and tried, in his brutishly straightforward way, to comfort her. No; she was not to be comforted. A miserable prospect was before her; she had not slept the whole night for thinking of it. Her

father had called her into his room the previous evening, had spoken about the state of her education, and had told her in so many words that she was to go to school. The place had been found, and the terms had been settled; and as soon as her clothes could be got ready, miss was to go.

"While that hateful Miss Gwilt was in the house," says this model young person, 'I would have gone to school willingly – I wanted to go. But it's all different now; I don't think of it in the same way; I feel too old for school. I'm quite heart-broken, Mr. Armadale.' There she stopped as if she had meant to say more, and gave him a look which finished the sentence plainly: 'I'm quite heart-broken, Mr. Armadale, now we are friendly again, at going away from you!' For downright brazen impudence, which a grown woman would be ashamed of, give me the young girls whose 'modesty' is so pertinaciously insisted on by the nauseous domestic sentimentalists of the present day!

"Even Armadale, booby as he is, understood her. After bewildering himself in a labyrinth of words that led nowhere, he took her – one can hardly say round the waist, for she hasn't got one – he took her round the last hook-and-eye of her dress, and, by way of offering her a refuge from the indignity of being sent to school at her age, made her a proposal of marriage in so many words.

"If I could have killed them both at that moment by lifting up my little finger, I have not the least doubt I should have lifted it. As things were, I only waited to see what Miss Milroy would do.

"She appeared to think it necessary – feeling, I suppose, that she had met him without her father's knowledge, and not

forgetting that I had had the start of her as the favored object of Mr. Armadale's good opinion – to assert herself by an explosion of virtuous indignation. She wondered how he could think of such a thing after his conduct with Miss Gwilt, and after her father had forbidden him the house! Did he want to make her feel how inexcusably she had forgotten what was due to herself? Was it worthy of a gentleman to propose what he knew as well as she did was impossible? and so on, and so on. Any man with brains in his head would have known what all this rodomontade really meant. Armadale took it so seriously that he actually attempted to justify himself.

“He declared, in his headlong, blundering way, that he was quite in earnest; he and her father might make it up and be friends again; and, if the major persisted in treating him as a stranger, young ladies and gentlemen in their situation had made runaway marriages before now, and fathers and mothers who wouldn't forgive them before had forgiven them afterward. Such outrageously straightforward love-making as this left Miss Milroy, of course, but two alternatives – to confess that she had been saying No when she meant Yes, or to take refuge in another explosion. She was hypocrite enough to prefer another explosion. ‘How dare you, Mr. Armadale? Go away directly! It's inconsiderate, it's heartless, it's perfectly disgraceful to say such things to me!’ and so on, and so on. It seems incredible, but it is not the less true, that he was positively fool enough to take her at her word. He begged her pardon, and went away like a child that is put in the corner – the most contemptible object in the form of man that eyes ever looked on!

"She waited, after he had gone, to compose herself, and I waited behind the trees to see how she would succeed. Her eyes wandered round slyly to the path by which he had left her. She smiled (grinned would be the truer way of putting it, with such a mouth as hers); took a few steps on tiptoe to look after him; turned back again, and suddenly burst into a violent fit of crying. I am not quite so easily taken in as Armadale, and I saw what it all meant plainly enough.

"To-morrow,' I thought to myself, 'you will be in the park again, miss, by pure accident. The next day, you will lead him on into proposing to you for the second time. The day after, he will venture back to the subject of runaway marriages, and you will only be becomingly confused. And the day after that, if he has got a plan to propose, and if your clothes are ready to be packed for school, you will listen to him.' Yes, yes; Time is always on the man's side, where a woman is concerned, if the man is only patient enough to let Time help him.

"I let her leave the place and go back to the cottage, quite unconscious that I had been looking at her. I waited among the trees, thinking. The truth is, I was impressed by what I had heard and seen, in a manner that it is not very easy to describe. It put the whole thing before me in a new light. It showed me – what I had never even suspected till this morning – that she is really fond of him.

"Heavy as my debt of obligation is to her, there is no fear *now* of my failing to pay it to the last farthing. It would have been no small triumph for me to stand between Miss Milroy and her ambition to be one of the leading ladies of the county. But it is infinitely more, where her first love is concerned, to

stand between Miss Milroy and her heart's desire. Shall I remember my own youth and spare her? No! She has deprived me of the one chance I had of breaking the chain that binds me to a past life too horrible to be thought of. I am thrown back into a position, compared to which the position of an out-cast who walks the streets is endurable and enviable. No, Miss Milroy – no, Mr. Armadale; I will spare neither of you.

“I have been back some hours. I have been thinking, and nothing has come of it. Ever since I got that strange letter of Midwinter's last Sunday, my usual readiness in emergencies has deserted me. When I am not thinking of him or of his story, my mind feels quite stupefied. I, who have always known what to do on other occasions, don't know what to do now. It would be easy enough, of course, to warn Major Milroy of his daughter's proceedings. But the major is fond of his daughter; Armadale is anxious to be reconciled with him; Armadale is rich and prosperous, and ready to submit to the elder man; and sooner or later they will be friends again, and the marriage will follow. Warning Major Milroy is only the way to embarrass them for the present; it is not the way to part them for good and all.

“What *is* the way? I can't see it. I could tear my own hair off my head! I could burn the house down! If there was a train of gunpowder under the whole world, I could light it, and blow the whole world to destruction – I am in such a rage, such a frenzy with myself for not seeing it!

“Poor dear Midwinter! Yes, '*dear*.' I don't care. I'm lonely and helpless. I want somebody who is gentle and loving to make much of me; I wish I had his head on my bosom again; I

have a good mind to go to London and marry him. Am I mad? Yes; all people who are as miserable as I am are mad. I must go to the window and get some air. Shall I jump out? No; it disfigures one so, and the coroner's inquest lets so many people see it.

"The air has revived me. I begin to remember that I have Time on my side, at any rate. Nobody knows but me of their secret meetings in the park the first thing in the morning. If jealous old Bashwood, who is slinking and sly enough for anything, tries to look privately after Armadale, in his own interests, he will try at the usual time when he goes to the steward's office. He knows nothing of Miss Milroy's early habits; and he won't be on the spot till Armadale has got back to the house. For another week to come, I may wait and watch them, and choose my own time and way of interfering the moment I see a chance of his getting the better of her hesitation, and making her say Yes.

"So here I wait, without knowing how things will end with Midwinter in London; with my purse getting emptier and emptier, and no appearance so far of any new pupils to fill it; with Mother Oldershaw certain to insist on having her money back the moment she knows I have failed; without prospects, friends, or hopes of any kind – a lost woman, if ever there was a lost woman yet. Well! I say it again and again and again – I don't care! Here I stop, if I sell the clothes off my back, if I hire myself at the public-house to play to the brutes in the tap-room; here I stop till the time comes, and I see the way to parting Armadale and Miss Milroy forever!"

"Seven o'clock. — Any signs that the time is coming yet? I hardly know; there are signs of a change, at any rate, in my position in the neighborhood.

"Two of the oldest and ugliest of the many old and ugly ladies who took up my case when I left Major Milroy's service have just called, announcing themselves, with the insufferable impudence of charitable Englishwomen, as a deputation from my patronesses. It seems that the news of my reconciliation with Armadale has spread from the servants' offices at the great house, and has reached the town, with this result.

"It is the unanimous opinion of my 'patronesses' (and the opinion of Major Milroy also, who has been consulted) that I have acted with the most inexcusable imprudence in going to Armadale's house, and in there speaking on friendly terms with a man whose conduct toward myself has made his name a by-word in the neighborhood. My total want of self-respect in this matter has given rise to a report that I am trading as cleverly as ever on my good looks, and that I am as likely as not to end in making Armadale marry me, after all. My 'patronesses' are, of course, too charitable to believe this. They merely feel it necessary to remonstrate with me in a Christian spirit, and to warn me that any second and similar imprudence on my part would force all my best friends in the place to withdraw the countenance and protection which I now enjoy.

"Having addressed me, turn and turn about, in these terms (evidently all rehearsed beforehand), my two Gorgon visitors straightened themselves in their chairs, and looked at me as much as to say, 'You may often have heard of Virtue, Miss

Gwilt, but we don't believe you ever really saw it in full bloom till we came and called on you.'

"Seeing they were bent on provoking me, I kept my temper, and answered them in my smoothest, sweetest, and most lady-like manner. I have noticed that the Christianity of a certain class of respectable people begins when they open their prayer-books at eleven o'clock on Sunday morning, and ends when they shut them up again at one o'clock on Sunday afternoon. Nothing so astonishes and insults Christians of this sort as reminding them of their Christianity on a week-day. On this hint, as the man says in the play, I spoke.

"What have I done that is wrong?" I asked, innocently. 'Mr. Armadale has injured me; and I have been to his house and forgiven him the injury. Surely there must be some mistake, ladies? You can't have really come here to remonstrate with me in a Christian spirit for performing an act of Christianity?'

"The two Gorgons got up. I firmly believe some women have cats' tails as well as cats' faces. I firmly believe the tails of those two particular cats wagged slowly under their petticoats, and swelled to four times their proper size.

"Temper we were prepared for, Miss Gwilt,' they said, 'but not Profanity. We wish you good-evening.'

"So they left me, and so 'Miss Gwilt' sinks out of the patronizing notice of the neighborhood

"I wonder what will come of this trumpety little quarrel? One thing will come of it which I can see already. The report will reach Miss Milroy's ears; she will insist on Armadale's justifying himself; and Armadale will end in satisfying her of his innocence by making another proposal. This will be quite

likely to hasten matters between them; at least it would with me. If I was in her place, I should say to myself, 'I will make sure of him while I can.' Supposing it doesn't rain to-morrow morning, I think I will take another early walk in the direction of the park."

"Midnight. — As I can't take my drops, with a morning walk before me, I may as well give up all hope of sleeping, and go on with my diary. Even with my drops, I doubt if my head would be very quiet on my pillow to-night. Since the little excitement of the scene with my 'lady-patronesses' has worn off, I have been troubled with misgivings which would leave me but a poor chance, under any circumstances, of getting much rest.

"I can't imagine why, but the parting words spoken to Armadale by that old brute of a lawyer have come back to my mind! Here they are, as reported in Mr. Bashwood's letter: 'Some other person's curiosity may go on from the point where you (and I) have stopped, and some other person's hand may let the broad daylight in yet on Miss Gwilt.'

"What does he mean by that? And what did he mean afterward when he overtook old Bashwood in the drive, by telling him to gratify his curiosity? Does this hateful Pedgift actually suppose there is any chance —? Ridiculous! Why, I have only to *look* at the feeble old creature, and he daren't lift his little finger unless I tell him. *He* try to pry into my past life, indeed! Why, people with ten times his brains, and a hundred times his courage, have tried — and have left off as wise as they began.

"I don't know, though; it might have been better if I had kept my temper when Bashwood was here the other night.

And it might be better still if I saw him to-morrow, and took him back into my good graces by giving him something to do for me. Suppose I tell him to look after the two Pedgifts, and to discover whether there is any chance of their attempting to renew their connection with Armadale? No such thing is at all likely; but if I gave old Bashwood this commission, it would flatter his sense of his own importance to me, and would at the same time serve the excellent purpose of keeping him out of my way."

"Thursday morning, nine o'clock. — I have just got back from the park.

"For once I have proved a true prophet. There they were together, at the same early hour, in the same secluded situation among the trees; and there was Miss in full possession of the report of my visit to the great house, and taking her tone accordingly.

"After saying one or two things about me, which I promise him not to forget, Armadale took the way to convince her of his constancy which I felt beforehand he would be driven to take. He repeated his proposal of marriage, with excellent effect this time. Tears and kisses and protestations followed; and my late pupil opened her heart at last, in the most innocent manner. Home, she confessed, was getting so miserable to her now that it was only less miserable than going to school. Her mother's temper was becoming more violent and unmanageable every day. The nurse, who was the only person with any influence over her, had gone away in disgust. Her father was becoming more and more immersed in his clock, and was made more and more resolute to send her away from home by the distressing

scenes which now took place with her mother almost day by day. I waited through these domestic disclosures on the chance of hearing any plans they might have for the future discussed between them; and my patience, after no small exercise of it, was rewarded at last.

“The first suggestion (as was only natural where such a fool as Armadale was concerned) came from the girl.

“She started an idea which I own I had not anticipated. She proposed that Armadale should write to her father; and, cleverer still, she prevented all fear of his blundering by telling him what he was to say. He was to express himself as deeply distressed at his estrangement from the major, and to request permission to call at the cottage, and say a few words in his own justification. That was all. The letter was not to be sent that day, for the applicants for the vacant place of Mrs. Milroy’s nurse were coming, and seeing them and questioning them would put her father, with his dislike of such things, in no humor to receive Armadale’s application indulgently. The Friday would be the day to send the letter, and on the Saturday morning if the answer was unfortunately not favorable, they might meet again, ‘I don’t like deceiving my father; he has always been so kind to me. And there will be no need to deceive him, Allan, if we can only make you friends again.’ Those were the last words the little hypocrite said, when I left them.

“What will the major do? Saturday morning will show. I won’t think of it till Saturday morning has come and gone. They are not man and wife yet; and again and again I say it, though my brains are still as helpless as ever, man and wife they shall never be.

"On my way home again, I caught Bashwood at his breakfast, with his poor old black tea-pot, and his little penny loaf, and his one cheap morsel of oily butter, and his darned dirty tablecloth. It sickens me to think of it.

"I coaxed and comforted the miserable old creature till the tears stood in his eyes, and he quite blushed with pleasure. He undertakes to look after the Pedgifts with the utmost alacrity. Pedgift the elder he described, when once roused, as the most obstinate man living; nothing will induce him to give way, unless Armadale gives way also on his side. Pedgift the younger is much the more likely of the two to make attempts at a reconciliation. Such, at least, is Bashwood's opinion. It is of very little consequence now what happens either way. The only important thing is to tie my elderly admirer safely again to my apron-string. And this is done.

"The post is late this morning. It has only just come in, and has brought me a letter from Midwinter.

"It is a charming letter; it flatters me and flutters me as if I was a young girl again. No reproaches for my never having written to him; no hateful hurrying of me, in plain words, to marry him. He only writes to tell me a piece of news. He has obtained, through his lawyers, a prospect of being employed as occasional correspondent to a newspaper which is about to be started in London. The employment will require him to leave England for the Continent, which would exactly meet his own wishes for the future, but he cannot consider the proposal seriously until he has first ascertained whether it would meet my wishes too. He knows no will but mine, and he leaves me to decide, after first mentioning the time allowed him before

his answer must be sent in. It is the time, of course (if I agree to his going abroad), in which I must marry him. But there is not a word about this in his letter. He asks for nothing but a sight of my handwriting to help him through the interval while we are separated from each other.

“That is the letter; not very long, but so prettily expressed.

“I think I can penetrate the secret of his fancy for going abroad. That wild idea of putting the mountains and the seas between Armadale and himself is still in his mind. As if either he or I could escape doing what we are fated to do – supposing we really are fated – by putting a few hundred or a few thousand miles between Armadale and ourselves! What strange absurdity and inconsistency! And yet how I like him for being absurd and inconsistent; for don’t I see plainly that I am at the bottom of it all? Who leads this clever man astray in spite of himself? Who makes him too blind to see the contradiction in his own conduct, which he would see plainly in the conduct of another person? How interested I do feel in him! How dangerously near I am to shutting my eyes on the past, and letting myself love him! Was Eve fonder of Adam than ever, I wonder, after she had coaxed him into eating the apple? I should have quite doted on him if I had been in her place. (Memorandum: To write Midwinter a charming little letter on my side, with a kiss in it; and as time is allowed him before he sends in his answer, to ask for time, too, before I tell him whether I will or will not go abroad.)”

“Five o’clock. – A tiresome visit from my landlady; eager for a little gossip, and full of news which she thinks will interest me.

"She is acquainted, I find, with Mrs. Milroy's late nurse; and she has been seeing her friend off at the station this afternoon. They talked, of course, of affairs at the cottage, and my name found its way into the conversation. I am quite wrong, it seems, if the nurse's authority is to be trusted, in believing Miss Milroy to be responsible for sending Mr. Armadale to my reference in London. Miss Milroy really knew nothing about it, and it all originated in her mother's mad jealousy of me. The present wretched state of things at the cottage is due entirely to the same cause. Mrs. Milroy is firmly persuaded that my remaining at Thorpe Ambrose is referable to my having some private means of communicating with the major which it is impossible for her to discover. With this conviction in her mind, she has become so unmanageable that no person, with any chance of bettering herself, could possibly remain in attendance on her; and sooner or later, the major, object to it as he may, will be obliged to place her under proper medical care.

"That is the sum and substance of what the wearisome landlady, had to tell me. Unnecessary to say that I was not in the least interested by it. Even if the nurse's assertion is to be depended on – which I persist in doubting – it is of no importance now. I know that Miss Milroy, and nobody but Miss Milroy has utterly ruined my prospect of becoming Mrs. Armadale of Thorpe Ambrose, and I care to know nothing more. If her mother was really alone in the attempt to expose my false reference, her mother seems to be suffering for it, at any rate. And so good-by to Mrs. Milroy; and Heaven defend me from any more last glimpses at the cottages seen through the medium of my landlady's spectacles!"

"Nine o'clock. – Bashwood has just left me, having come with news from the great house. Pedgift the younger has made his attempt at bringing about a reconciliation this very day, and has failed. I am the sole cause of the failure. Armadale is quite willing to be reconciled if Pedgift the elder will avoid all future occasion of disagreement between them by never recurring to the subject of Miss Gwilt. This, however, happens to be exactly the condition which Pedgift's father – with his opinion of me and my doings – should consider it his duty to Armadale *not* to accept. So lawyer and client remain as far apart as ever, and the obstacle of the Pedgifts is cleared out of my way.

"It might have been a very awkward obstacle, so far as Pedgift the elder is concerned, if one of his suggestions had been carried out; I mean, if an officer of the London police had been brought down here to look at me. It is a question, even now, whether I had better not take to the thick veil again, which I always wear in London and other large places. The only difficulty is that it would excite remark in this inquisitive little town to see me wearing a thick veil, for the first time, in the summer weather.

"It is close on ten o'clock; I have been dawdling over my diary longer than I supposed.

"No words can describe how weary and languid I feel. Why don't I take my sleeping drops and go to bed? There is no meeting between Armadale and Miss Milroy to force me into early rising to-morrow morning. Am I trying, for the hundredth time, to see my way clearly into the future – trying, in my present state of fatigue, to be the quick-witted woman I once was,

before all these anxieties came together and overpowered me? or am I perversely afraid of my bed when I want it most? I don't know; I am tired and miserable; I am looking wretchedly haggard and old. With a little encouragement, I might be fool enough to burst out crying. Luckily, there is no one to encourage me. What sort of a night is it, I wonder?

"A cloudy night, with the moon showing at intervals, and the wind rising. I can just hear it moaning among the ins and outs of the unfinished cottages at the end of the street. My nerves must be a little shaken, I think. I was startled just now by a shadow on the wall. It was only after a moment or two that I mustered sense enough to notice where the candle was, and to see that the shadow was my own.

"Shadows remind me of Midwinter; or, if the shadows don't, something else does. I must have another look at his letter, and then I will positively go to bed.

"I shall end in getting fond of him. If I remain much longer in this lonely uncertain state – so irresolute, so unlike my usual self – I shall end in getting fond of him. What madness! As if *I* could ever be really fond of a man again!

"Suppose I took one of my sudden resolutions, and married him. Poor as he is, he would give me a name and a position if I became his wife. Let me see how the name – his own name – would look, if I really did consent to it for mine.

"Mrs. Armadale! Pretty.

"Mrs. Allan Armadale! Prettier still.

"My nerves *must* be shaken. Here is my own handwriting startling me now! It is so strange; it is enough to startle anybody. The similarity in the two names never struck me in this

light before. Marry which of the two I might, my name would, of course, be the same. I should have been Mrs. Armadale, if I had married the light-haired Allan at the great house. And I can be Mrs. Armadale still, if I marry the dark-haired Allan in London. It's almost maddening to write it down – to feel that something ought to come of it – and to find nothing come.

“How *can* anything come of it? If I did go to London, and marry him (as of course I must marry him) under his real name, would he let me be known by it afterward? With all his reasons for concealing his real name, he would insist – no, he is too fond of me to do that – he would entreat me to take the name which he has assumed. Mrs. Midwinter. Hideous! Ozias, too, when I wanted to address him familiarly, as his wife should. Worse than hideous!

“And yet there would be some reason for humoring him in this if he asked me.

“Suppose the brute at the great house happened to leave this neighborhood as a single man; and suppose, in his absence, any of the people who know him heard of a Mrs. Allan Armadale, they would set her down at once as his wife. Even if they actually saw me – if I actually came among them with that name, and if he was not present to contradict it – his own servants would be the first to say, “We knew she would marry him, after all!” And my lady-patronesses, who will be ready to believe anything of me now we have quarreled, would join the chorus *sotto voce*: “Only think, my dear, the report that so shocked us actually turns out to be true!” No. If I marry Midwinter, I must either be perpetually putting my husband and

myself in a false position – or I must leave his real name, his pretty, romantic name, behind me at the church door.

“My husband! As if I was really going to marry him! I am *not* going to marry him, and there’s an end of it.

“Half-past ten. – Oh, dear! oh, dear! how my temples throb, and how hot my weary eyes feel! There is the moon looking at me through the window. How fast the little scattered clouds are flying before the wind! Now they let the moon in; and now they shut the moon out. What strange shapes the patches of yellow light take, and lose again, all in a moment! No peace and quiet for me, look where I may. The candle keeps flickering, and the very sky itself is restless to-night.

“To bed! to bed!” as Lady Macbeth says. I wonder, by-the-by, what Lady Macbeth would have done in my position? She would have killed somebody when her difficulties first began. Probably Armadale.

“Friday morning. – A night’s rest, thanks again to my Drops. I went to breakfast in better spirits, and received a morning welcome in the shape of a letter from Mrs. Oldershaw.

“My silence has produced its effect on Mother Jezebel. She attributes it to the right cause, and she shows her claws at last. If I am not in a position to pay my note of hand for thirty pounds, which is due on Tuesday next, her lawyer is instructed to ‘take the usual course.’ *If* I am not in a position to pay it! Why, when I have settled to-day with my landlord, I shall have barely five pounds left! There is not the shadow of a prospect between now and Tuesday of my earning any money; and I don’t possess a friend in this place who would trust me with

sixpence. The difficulties that are swarming round me wanted but one more to complete them, and that one has come.

"Midwinter would assist me, of course, if I could bring myself to ask him for assistance. But *that* means marrying him. Am I really desperate enough and helpless enough to end it in that way? No; not yet.

"My head feels heavy; I must get out into the fresh air, and think about it."

"Two o'clock. – I believe I have caught the infection of Midwinter's superstition. I begin to think that events are forcing me nearer and nearer to some end which I don't see yet, but which I am firmly persuaded is now not far off.

"I have been insulted – deliberately insulted before witnesses – by Miss Milroy.

"After walking, as usual, in the most unfrequented place I could pick out, and after trying, not very successfully, to think to some good purpose of what I am to do next, I remembered that I needed some note-paper and pens, and went back to the town to the stationer's shop. It might have been wiser to have sent for what I wanted. But I was weary of myself, and weary of my lonely rooms; and I did my own errand, for no better reason than that it was something to do.

"I had just got into the shop, and was asking for what I wanted, when another customer came in. We both looked up, and recognized each other at the same moment: Miss Milroy.

"A woman and a lad were behind the counter, besides the man who was serving me. The woman civilly addressed the new customer. 'What can we have the pleasure of doing for you, miss?' After pointing it first by looking me straight in the

face, she answered, 'Nothing, thank you, at present. I'll come back when the shop is empty.'

"She went out. The three people in the shop looked at me in silence. In silence, on my side, I paid for my purchases, and left the place. I don't know how I might have felt if I had been in my usual spirits. In the anxious, unsettled state I am in now, I can't deny it, the girl stung me.

"In the weakness of the moment (for it was nothing else), I was on the point of matching her petty spitefulness by spitefulness quite as petty on my side. I had actually got as far as the whole length of the street on my way to the major's cottage, bent on telling him the secret of his daughter's morning walks, before my better sense came back to me. When I did cool down, I turned round at once, and took the way home. No, no, Miss Milroy; mere temporary mischief-making at the cottage, which would only end in your father forgiving you, and in Armadale profiting by his indulgence, will nothing like pay the debt I owe you. I don't forget that your heart is set on Armadale; and that the major, however he may talk, has always ended hitherto in giving you your own way. My head may be getting duller and duller, but it has not quite failed me yet.

"In the meantime, there is Mother Oldershaw's letter waiting obstinately to be answered; and here am I, not knowing what to do about it yet. Shall I answer it or not? It doesn't matter for the present; there are some hours still to spare before the post goes out.

"Suppose I asked Armadale to lend me the money? I should enjoy getting *something* out of him; and I believe, in his present situation with Miss Milroy, he would do anything to be rid

of me. Mean enough this, on my part. Pooh! When you hate and despise a man, as I hate and despise Armadale, who cares for looking mean in *his* eyes?

“And yet my pride – or my something else, I don’t know what – shrinks from it.

“Half-past two – only half-past two. Oh, the dreadful weariness of these long summer days! I can’t keep thinking and thinking any longer; I must do something to relieve my mind. Can I go to my piano? No; I’m not fit for it. Work? No; I shall get thinking again if I take to my needle. A man, in my place, would find refuge in drink. I’m not a man, and I can’t drink. I’ll dawdle over my dresses, and put my things tidy.”

“Has an hour passed? More than an hour. It seems like a minute.

“I can’t look back through these leaves, but I know I wrote somewhere that I felt myself getting nearer and nearer to some end that was still hidden from me. The end is hidden no longer. The cloud is off my mind, the blindness has gone from my eyes. I see it! I see it!

“It came to me – I never sought it. If I was lying on my death-bed, I could swear, with a safe conscience, I never sought it.

“I was only looking over my things; I was as idly and as frivolously employed as the most idle and most frivolous woman living. I went through my dresses, and my linen. What could be more innocent? Children go through their dresses and their linen.

"It was, such a long summer day, and I was so tired of myself. I went to my boxes next. I looked over the large box first, which I usually leave open; and then I tried the small box, which I always keep locked.

"From one thing to the other, I came at last to the bundle of letters at the bottom – the letters of the man for whom I once sacrificed and suffered everything; the man who has made me what I am.

"A hundred times I had determined to burn his letters; but I have never burned them. This, time, all I said was, 'I won't read his letters!' And I did read them.

"The villain – the false, cowardly, heartless villain – what have I to do with his letters now? Oh, the misery of being a woman! Oh, the meanness that our memory of a man can tempt us to, when our love for him is dead and gone! I read the letters – I was so lonely and so miserable, I read the letters.

"I came to the last – the letter he wrote to encourage me, when I hesitated as the terrible time came nearer and nearer; the letter that revived me when my resolution failed at the eleventh hour. I read on, line after line, till I came to these words:

"...I really have no patience with such absurdities as you have written to me. You say I am driving you on to do what is beyond a woman's courage. Am I? I might refer you to any collection of Trials, English or foreign, to show that you were utterly wrong. But such collections may be beyond your reach; and I will only refer you to a case in yesterday's newspaper. The circumstances are totally different from our circumstanc-

es; but the example of resolution in a woman is an example worth your notice.

"You will find, among the law reports, a married woman charged with fraudulently representing herself to be the missing widow of an officer in the merchant service, who was supposed to have been drowned. The name of the prisoner's husband (living) and the name of the officer (a very common one, both as to Christian and surname) happened to be identically the same. There was money to be got by it (sorely wanted by the prisoner's husband, to whom she was devotedly attached), if the fraud had succeeded. The woman took it all on herself. Her husband was helpless and ill, and the bailiffs were after him. The circumstances, as you may read for yourself, were all in her favor, and were so well managed by her that the lawyers themselves acknowledged she might have succeeded, if the supposed drowned man had not turned up alive and well in the nick of time to confront her. The scene took place at the lawyer's office, and came out in the evidence at the police court. The woman was handsome, and the sailor was a good-natured man. He wanted, at first, if the lawyers would have allowed him, to let her off. He said to her, among other things: "You didn't count on the drowned man coming back, alive and hearty, did you, ma'am?" "It's lucky for you," she said, "I didn't count on it. You have escaped the sea, but you wouldn't have escaped *me*." "Why, what would you have done, if you *had* known I was coming back?" says the sailor. She looked him steadily in the face, and answered: "I would have killed you." There! Do you think such a woman as that would have written to tell me I was pressing her further than she had courage to go? A hand-

some woman, too, like yourself. You would drive some men in my position to wish they had her now in your place.'

"I read no further. When I had got on, line by line, to those words, it burst on me like a flash of lightning. In an instant I saw it as plainly as I see it now. It is horrible, it is unheard of, it outdares all daring; but, if I can only nerve myself to face one terrible necessity, it is to be done. *I may personate the richly provided widow of Allan Armadale of Thorpe Ambrose, if I can count on Allan Armadale's death in a given time.*

"There, in plain words, is the frightful temptation under which I now feel myself sinking. It is frightful in more ways than one; for it has come straight out of that other temptation to which I yielded in the by-gone time.

"Yes; there the letter has been waiting for me in my box, to serve a purpose never thought of by the villain who wrote it. There is the Case, as he called it – only quoted to taunt me; utterly unlike my own case at the time – there it has been, waiting and lurking for me through all the changes in my life, till it has come to be like *my* case at last.

"It might startle any woman to see this, and even this is not the worst. The whole thing has been in my Diary, for days past, without my knowing it! Every idle fancy that escaped me has been tending secretly that one way! And I never saw, never suspected it, till the reading of the letter put my own thoughts before me in a new light – till I saw the shadow of my own circumstances suddenly reflected in one special circumstance of that other woman's case!

"It is to be done, if I can but look the necessity in the face. It is to be done, *if I can count on Allan Armadale's death in a given time.*

"All but his death is easy. The whole series of events under which I have been blindly chafing and fretting for more than a week past have been, one and all – though I was too stupid to see it – events in my favor; events paving the way smoothly and more smoothly straight to the end.

"In three bold steps – only three! – that end might be reached. Let Midwinter marry me privately, under his real name – step the first! Let Armadale leave Thorpe Ambrose a single man, and die in some distant place among strangers – step the second!

"Why am I hesitating? Why not go on to step the third, and last?

"I *will* go on. Step the third, and last, is my appearance, after the announcement of Armadale's death has reached this neighborhood, in the character of Armadale's widow, with my marriage certificate in my hand to prove my claim. It is as clear as the sun at noonday. Thanks to the exact similarity between the two names, and thanks to the careful manner in which the secret of that similarity has been kept, I may be the wife of the dark Allan Armadale, known as such to nobody but my husband and myself; and I may, out of that very position, claim the character of widow of the light Allan Armadale, with proof to support me (in the shape of my marriage certificate) which would be proof in the estimation of the most incredulous person living.

"To think of my having put all this in my Diary! To think of my having actually contemplated this very situation, and having seen nothing more in it, at the time, than a reason (if I married Midwinter) for consenting to appear in the world under my husband's assumed name!

"What is it daunts me? The dread of obstacles? The fear of discovery?

"Where are the obstacles? Where is the fear of discovery?

"I am actually suspected all over the neighborhood of intriguing to be mistress of Thorpe Ambrose. I am the only person who knows the real turn that Armadale's inclinations have taken. Not a creature but myself is as yet aware of his early morning meetings with Miss Milroy. If it is necessary to part them, I can do it at any moment by an anonymous line to the major. If it is necessary to remove Armadale from Thorpe Ambrose, I can get him away at three days' notice. His own lips informed me, when I last spoke to him, that he would go to the ends of the earth to be friends again with Midwinter, if Midwinter would let him. I have only to tell Midwinter to write from London, and ask to be reconciled; and Midwinter would obey me – and to London Armadale would go. Every difficulty, at starting, is smoothed over ready to my hand. Every after-difficulty I could manage for myself. In the whole venture – desperate as it looks to pass myself off for the widow of one man, while I am all the while the wife of the other – there is absolutely no necessity that wants twice considering, but the one terrible necessity of Armadale's death.

"His death! It might be a terrible necessity to any other woman; but is it, ought it to be terrible to Me?"

"I hate him for his mother's sake. I hate him for his own sake. I hate him for going to London behind my back, and making inquiries about me. I hate him for forcing me out of my situation before I wanted to go. I hate him for destroying all my hopes of marrying him, and throwing me back helpless on my own miserable life. But, oh, after what I have done already in the past time, how can I? how can I?"

"The girl, too – the girl who has come between us; who has taken him away from me; who has openly insulted me this very day – how the girl whose heart is set on him would feel it if he died! What a vengeance on *her*, if I did it! And when I was received as Armadale's widow what a triumph for *me*. Triumph! It is more than triumph – it is the salvation of me. A name that can't be assailed, a station that can't be assailed, to hide myself in from my past life! Comfort, luxury, wealth! An income of twelve hundred a year secured to me secured by a will which has been looked at by a lawyer: secured independently of anything Armadale can say or do himself! I never had twelve hundred a year. At my luckiest time, I never had half as much, really my own. What have I got now? Just five pounds left in the world – and the prospect next week of a debtor's prison.

"But, oh, after what I have done already in the past time, how can I? how can I?"

"Some women – in my place, and with my recollections to look back on – would feel it differently. Some women would say, 'It's easier the second time than the first.' Why can't I? why can't I?"

"Oh, you Devil tempting me, is there no Angel near to raise some timely obstacle between this and to-morrow which might help me to give it up?"

"I shall sink under it – I shall sink, if I write or think of it any more! I'll shut up these leaves and go out again. I'll get some common person to come with me, and we will talk of common things. I'll take out the woman of the house, and her children. We will go and see something. There is a show of some kind in the town – I'll treat them to it. I'm not such an ill-natured woman when I try; and the landlady has really been kind to me. Surely I might occupy my mind a little in seeing her and her children enjoying themselves.

"A minute since, I shut up these leaves as I said I would; and now I have opened them again, I don't know why. I think my brain is turned. I feel as if something was lost out of my mind; I feel as if I ought to find it here.

"I have found it! *Midwinter!!!*

"Is it possible that I can have been thinking of the reasons For and Against, for an hour past – writing *Midwinter's* name over and over again – speculating seriously on marrying him – and all the time not once remembering that, even with every other impediment removed, *he* alone, when the time came, would be an insurmountable obstacle in my way? Has the effort to face the consideration of Armadale's death absorbed me to *that* degree? I suppose it has. I can't account for such extraordinary forgetfulness on my part in any other way.

"Shall I stop and think it out, as I have thought out all the rest? Shall I ask myself if the obstacle of *Midwinter* would, after all, when the time came, be the unmanageable obstacle

that it looks at present? No! What need is there to think of it? I have made up my mind to get the better of the temptation. I have made up my mind to give my landlady and her children a treat; I have made up my mind to close my Diary. And closed it shall be.

"Six o'clock. — The landlady's gossip is unendurable; the landlady's children distract me. I have left them to run back here before post time and write a line to Mrs. Oldershaw.

"The dread that I shall sink under the temptation has grown stronger and stronger on me. I have determined to put it beyond my power to have my own way and follow my own will. Mother Oldershaw shall be the salvation of me for the first time since I have known her. If I can't pay my note of hand, she threatens me with an arrest. Well, she *shall* arrest me. In the state my mind is in now, the best thing that can happen to me is to be taken away from Thorpe Ambrose, whether I like it or not. I will write and say that I am to be found here I will write and tell her, in so many words, that the best service she can render me is to lock me up."

"Seven o'clock. — The letter has gone to the post. I had begun to feel a little easier, when the children came in to thank me for taking them to the show. One of them is a girl, and the girl upset me. She is a forward child, and her hair is nearly the color of mine. She said, 'I shall be like you when I have grown bigger, shan't I?' Her idiot of a mother said, 'Please to excuse her, miss,' and took her out of the room, laughing. Like me! I don't pretend to be fond of the child; but think of her being like me!"

“Saturday morning. – I have done well for once in acting on impulse, and writing as I did to Mrs. Oldershaw. The only new circumstance that has happened is another circumstance in my favor!

“Major Milroy has answered Armadale’s letter, entreating permission to call at the cottage and justify himself. His daughter read it in silence, when Armadale handed it to her at their meeting this morning, in the park. But they talked about it afterward, loud enough for me to hear them. The major persists in the course he has taken. He says his opinion of Armadale’s conduct has been formed, not on common report, but on Armadale’s own letters, and he sees no reason to alter the conclusion at which he arrived when the correspondence between them was closed.

“This little matter had, I confess, slipped out of my memory. It might have ended awkwardly for *me*. If Major Milroy had been less obstinately wedded to his own opinion, Armadale might have justified himself; the marriage engagement might have been acknowledged; and all *my* power of influencing the matter might have been at an end. As it is, they must continue to keep the engagement strictly secret; and Miss Milroy, who has never ventured herself near the great house since the thunder-storm forced her into it for shelter, will be less likely than ever to venture there now. I can part them when I please; with an anonymous line to the major, I can part them when I please!

“After having discussed the letter, the talk between them turned on what they were to do next. Major Milroy’s severity, as it soon appeared, produced the usual results. Armadale

returned to the subject of the elopement; and this time she listened to him. There is everything to drive her to it. Her outfit of clothes is nearly ready; and the summer holidays, at the school which has been chosen for her, end at the end of next week. When I left them, they had decided to meet again and settle something on Monday.

"The last words I heard him address to her, before I went away, shook me a little. He said: 'There is one difficulty, Neelie, that needn't trouble us, at any rate. I have got plenty of money.' And then he kissed her. The way to his life began to look an easier way to me when he talked of his money, and kissed her.

"Some hours have passed, and the more I think of it, the more I fear the blank interval between this time and the time when Mrs. Oldershaw calls in the law, and protects me against myself. It might have been better if I had stopped at home this morning. But how could I? After the insult she offered me yesterday, I tingled all over to go and look at her.

"To-day; Sunday; Monday; Tuesday. They can't arrest me for the money before Wednesday. And my miserable five pounds are dwindling to four! And he told her he had plenty of money! And she blushed and trembled when he kissed her. It might have been better for him, better for her, and better for me, if my debt had fallen due yesterday, and if the bailiffs had their hands on me at this moment.

"Suppose I had the means of leaving Thorpe Ambrose by the next train, and going somewhere abroad, and absorbing myself in some new interest, among new people. Could I do it, rather than look again at that easy way to his life which would smooth the way to everything else?"

"Perhaps I might. But where is the money to come from? Surely some way of getting it struck me a day or two since? Yes; that mean idea of asking Armadale to help me! Well; I *will* be mean for once. I'll give him the chance of making a generous use of that well-filled purse which it is such a comfort to him to reflect on in his present circumstances. It would soften my heart toward any man if he lent me money in my present extremity; and, if Armadale lends me money, it might soften my heart toward him. When shall I go? At once! I won't give myself time to feel the degradation of it, and to change my mind."

"Three 'clock. – I mark the hour. He has sealed his own doom. He has insulted me.

"Yes! I have suffered it once from Miss Milroy. And I have now suffered it a second time from Armadale himself. An insult – a marked, merciless, deliberate insult in the open day!

"I had got through the town, and had advanced a few hundred yards along the road that leads to the great house, when I saw Armadale at a little distance, coming toward me. He was walking fast – evidently with some errand of his own to take him to the town. The instant he caught sight of me he stopped, colored up, took off his hat, hesitated, and turned aside down a lane behind him, which I happen to know would take him exactly in the contrary direction to the direction in which he was walking when he first saw me. His conduct said in so many words, 'Miss Milroy may hear of it; I daren't run the risk of being seen speaking to you.' Men have used me heartlessly; men have done and said hard things to me; but no man living ever yet treated me as if I was plague-struck, and as if the very air about me was infected by my presence!

"I say no more. When he walked away from me down that lane, he walked to his death. I have written to Midwinter to expect me in London next week, and to be ready for our marriage soon afterward."

"Four o'clock. — Half an hour since, I put on my bonnet to go out and post the letter to Midwinter myself. And here I am, still in my room, with my mind torn by doubts, and my letter on the table.

"Armada counts for nothing in the perplexities that are now torturing me. It is Midwinter who makes me hesitate. Can I take the first of those three steps that lead me to the end, without the common caution of looking at consequences? Can I marry Midwinter, without knowing beforehand how to meet the obstacle of my husband, when the time comes which transforms me from the living Armada's wife to the dead Armada's widow?

"Why can't I think of it, when I know I *must* think of it? Why can't I look at it as steadily as I have looked at all the rest? I feel his kisses on my lips; I feel his tears on my bosom; I feel his arms round me again. He is far away in London; and yet, he is here and won't let me think of it!

"Why can't I wait a little? Why can't I let Time help me? Time? It's Saturday! What need is there to think of it, unless I like? There is no post to London to-day. I *must* wait. If I posted the letter, it wouldn't go. Besides, to-morrow I may hear from Mrs. Oldershaw. I ought to wait to hear from Mrs. Oldershaw. I can't consider myself a free woman till I know what Mrs. Oldershaw means to do. There is a necessity for waiting till to-

morrow. I shall take my bonnet off, and lock the letter up in my desk."

"Sunday morning. — There is no resisting it! One after another the circumstances crowd on me. They come thicker and thicker, and they all force me one way.

"I have got Mother Oldershaw's answer. The wretch fawns on me, and cringes to me. I can see, as plainly as if she had acknowledged it, that she suspects me of seeing my own way to success at Thorpe Ambrose without her assistance. Having found threatening me useless, she tries coaxing me now. I am her darling Lydia again! She is quite shocked that I could imagine she ever really intended to arrest her bosom friend; and she has only to entreat me, as a favor to herself, to renew the bill!

"I say once more, no mortal creature could resist it! Time after time I have tried to escape the temptation; and time after time the circumstances drive me back again. I can struggle no longer. The post that takes the letters to-night shall take my letter to Midwinter among the rest.

"To-night! If I give myself till to-night, something else may happen. If I give myself till to-night, I may hesitate again. I'm weary of the torture of hesitating. I must and will have relief in the present, cost what it may in the future. My letter to Midwinter will drive me mad if I see it staring and staring at me in my desk any longer. I can post it in ten minutes' time — and I will!

"It is done. The first of the three steps that lead me to the end is a step taken. My mind is quieter — the letter is in the post.

“By to-morrow Midwinter will receive it. Before the end of the week Armadale must be publicly seen to leave Thorpe Ambrose; and I must be publicly seen to leave with him.

“Have I looked at the consequences of my marriage to Midwinter? No! Do I know how to meet the obstacle of my husband, when the time comes which transforms me from the living Armadale’s wife to the dead Armadale’s widow?

“No! When the time comes, I must meet the obstacle as I best may. I am going blindfold, then – so far as Midwinter is concerned – into this frightful risk? Yes; blindfold. Am I out of my senses? Very likely. Or am I a little too fond of him to look the thing in the face? I dare say. Who cares?

“I won’t, I won’t, I won’t think of it! Haven’t I a will of my own? And can’t I think, if I like, of something else?”

“Here is Mother Jezebel’s cringing letter. *That* is something else to think of. I’ll answer it. I am in a fine humor for writing to Mother Jezebel.”

Conclusion of Miss Gwilt’s Letter to Mrs. Oldershaw.

“...I told you, when I broke off, that I would wait before I finished this, and ask my Diary if I could safely tell you what I have now got it in my mind to do. Well, I have asked; and my Diary says, ‘Don’t tell her!’ Under these circumstances I close my letter – with my best excuses for leaving you in the dark.

“I shall probably be in London before long – and I may tell you by word of mouth what I don’t think it safe to write here. Mind, I make no promise! It all depends on how I feel toward you at the time. I don’t doubt your discretion;

but (under certain circumstances) I am not so sure of your courage.

L. G.”

“P. S. — *My best thanks for your permission to renew the bill. I decline profiting by the proposal. The money will be ready when the money is due. I have a friend now in London who will pay it if I ask him. Do you wonder who the friend is? You will wonder at one or two other things, Mrs. Oldershaw, before many weeks more are over your head and mine.*”

CHAPTER XI LOVE AND LAW

On the morning of Monday, the 28th of July, Miss Gwilt – once more on the watch for Allan and Neelie – reached her customary post of observation in the park, by the usual round-about way.

She was a little surprised to find Neelie alone at the place of meeting. She was more seriously astonished, when the tardy Allan made his appearance ten minutes later, to see him mounting the side of the dell, with a large volume under his arm, and to hear him say, as an apology for being late, that “he had muddled away his time in hunting for the Books; and that he had only found one, after all, which seemed in the least likely to repay either Neelie or himself for the trouble of looking into it.”

If Miss Gwilt had waited long enough in the park, on the previous Saturday, to hear the lovers’ parting words on that occasion, she would have been at no loss to explain the mystery of the volume under Allan’s arm, and she would have understood the apology which he now offered for being late as readily as Neelie herself.

There is a certain exceptional occasion in life – the occasion of marriage – on which even girls in their teens sometimes become capable (more or less hysterically) of looking at consequences. At the farewell moment of the interview on Saturday, Neelie's mind had suddenly precipitated itself into the future; and she had utterly confounded Allan by inquiring whether the contemplated elopement was an offense punishable by the Law? Her memory satisfied her that she had certainly read somewhere, at some former period, in some book or other (possibly a novel), of an elopement with a dreadful end – of a bride dragged home in hysterics – and of a bridegroom sentenced to languish in prison, with all his beautiful hair cut off, by Act of Parliament, close to his head. Supposing she could bring herself to consent to the elopement at all – which she positively declined to promise – she must first insist on discovering whether there was any fear of the police being concerned in her marriage as well as the parson and the clerk. Allan, being a man, ought to know; and to Allan she looked for information – with this preliminary assurance to assist him in laying down the law, that she would die of a broken heart a thousand times over, rather than be the innocent means of sending him to languish in prison, and of cutting his hair off, by Act of Parliament, close to his head. "It's no laughing matter," said Neelie, resolutely, in conclusion; "I decline even to think of our marriage till my mind is made easy first on the subject of the Law."

"But I don't know anything about the law, not even as much as you do," said Allan. "Hang the law! I don't mind my head being cropped. Let's risk it."

"Risk it?" repeated Neelie, indignantly. "Have you no consideration for me? I won't risk it! Where there's a will, there's a way. We must find out the law for ourselves."

"With all my heart," said Allan. "How?"

"Out of books, to be sure! There must be quantities of information in that enormous library of yours at the great house. If you really love me, you won't mind going over the backs of a few thousand books, for my sake!"

"I'll go over the backs of ten thousand!" cried Allan, warmly. "Would you mind telling me what I'm to look for?"

"For 'Law,' to be sure! When it says 'Law' on the back, open it, and look inside for Marriage – read every word of it – and then come here and explain it to me. What! you don't think your head is to be trusted to do such a simple thing as that?"

"I'm certain it isn't," said Allan. "Can't you help me?"

"Of course I can, if you can't manage without me! Law may be hard, but it can't be harder than music; and I must, and will, satisfy my mind. Bring me all the books you can find, on Monday morning – in a wheelbarrow, if there are a good many of them, and if you can't manage it in any other way."

The result of this conversation was Allan's appearance in the park, with a volume of Blackstone's Commentaries under his arm, on the fatal Monday morning, when Miss Gwilt's written engagement of marriage was placed in Midwinter's hands. Here again, in this, as in all other human instances, the widely discordant elements of the grotesque and the terrible were forced together by that subtle law of contrast which is one of the laws of mortal life. Amid all the thickening complications now impending over their heads – with the shadow of medi-

tated murder stealing toward one of them already from the lurking-place that hid Miss Gwilt – the two sat down, unconscious of the future, with the book between them; and applied themselves to the study of the law of marriage, with a grave resolution to understand it, which, in two such students, was nothing less than a burlesque in itself

“Find the place,” said Neelie, as soon as they were comfortably established. “We must manage this by what they call a division of labor. You shall read, and I’ll take notes.”

She produced forthwith a smart little pocket-book and pencil, and opened the book in the middle, where there was a blank page on the right hand and the left. At the top of the right-hand page she wrote the word *Good*. At the top of the left-hand page she wrote the word *Bad*. “‘Good’ means where the law is on our side,” she explained; “and ‘Bad’ means where the law is against us. We will have ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ opposite each other, all down the two pages; and when we get to the bottom, we’ll add them up, and act accordingly. They say girls have no heads for business. Haven’t they! Don’t look at me – look at Blackstone, and begin.”

“Would you mind giving one a kiss first?” asked Allan.

“I should mind it very much. In our serious situation, when we have both got to exert our intellects, I wonder you can ask for such a thing!”

“That’s why I asked for it,” said the unblushing Allan. “I feel as if it would clear my head.”

“Oh, if it would clear your head, that’s quite another thing! I must clear your head, of course, at any sacrifice. Only one,

mind," she whispered, coquettishly; "and pray be careful of Blackstone, or you'll lose the place."

There was a pause in the conversation. Blackstone and the pocket-book both rolled on the ground together.

"If this happens again," said Neelie, picking up the pocket-book, with her eyes and her complexion at their brightest and best, "I shall sit with my back to you for the rest of the morning. *Will you go on?*"

Allan found his place for the second time, and fell head-long into the bottomless abyss of the English Law.

"Page 280," he began. "Law of husband and wife. Here's a bit I don't understand, to begin with: 'It may be observed generally that the law considers marriage in the light of a Contract.' What does that mean? I thought a contract was the sort of a thing a builder signs when he promises to have the workmen out of the house in a given time, and when the time comes (as my poor mother used to say) the workmen never go."

"Is there nothing about Love?" asked Neelie. "Look a little lower down."

"Not a word. He sticks to his confounded 'Contract' all the way through."

"Then he's a brute! Go on to something else that's more in our way."

"Here's a bit that's more in our way: 'Incapacities. If any persons under legal incapacities come together, it is a meretricious, and not a matrimonial union.' (Blackstone's a good one at long words, isn't he? I wonder what he means by meretricious?) 'The first of these legal disabilities is a prior marriage, and having another husband or wife living –'"

"Stop!" said Neelie; "I must make a note of that." She gravely made her first entry on the page headed "Good," as follows: "I have no husband, and Allan has no wife. We are both entirely unmarried at the present time."

"All right, so far," remarked Allan, looking over her shoulder.

"Go on," said Neelie. "What next?"

"The next disability," proceeded Allan, "'is want of age. The age for consent to matrimony is, fourteen in males, and twelve in females.' Come!" cried Allan, cheerfully, "Blackstone begins early enough, at any rate!"

Neelie was too business-like to make any other remark, on her side, than the necessary remark in the pocket-book. She made another entry under the head of "Good": "I am old enough to consent, and so is Allan too. Go on," resumed Neelie, looking over the reader's shoulder. "Never mind all that prosing of Blackstone's, about the husband being of years of discretion, and the wife under twelve. Abominable wretch! the wife under twelve! Skip to the third incapacity, if there is one."

"The third incapacity," Allan went on, "'is want of reason.'"

Neelie immediately made a third entry on the side of "Good": "Allan and I are both perfectly reasonable. Skip to the next page."

Allan skipped. "A fourth incapacity is in respect of proximity of relationship."

A fourth entry followed instantly on the cheering side of the pocket-book: "He loves me, and I love him – without our

being in the slightest degree related to each other. Any more?" asked Neelie, tapping her chin impatiently with the end of the pencil.

"Plenty more," rejoined Allan; "all in hieroglyphics. Look here: 'Marriage Acts, 4 Geo. IV., c. 76, and 6 and 7 Will. IV., c. 85 (g).' Blackstone's intellect seems to be wandering here. Shall we take another skip, and see if he picks himself up again on the next page?"

"Wait a little," said Neelie; "what's that I see in the middle?" She read for a minute in silence, over Allan's shoulder, and suddenly clasped her hands in despair. "I knew I was right!" she exclaimed. "Oh, heavens, here it is!"

"Where?" asked Allan. "I see nothing about languishing in prison, and cropping a fellow's hair close to his head, unless it's in the hieroglyphics. Is '4 Geo. IV.' short for 'Lock him up?' and does 'c. 85 (g)' mean, 'Send for the hair-cutter?'"

"Pray be serious," remonstrated Neelie. "We are both sitting on a volcano. There," she said pointing to the place. "Read it! If anything can bring you to a proper sense of our situation, *that* will."

Allan cleared his throat, and Neelie held the point of her pencil ready on the depressing side of the account – otherwise the "Bad" page of the pocket-book.

"And as it is the policy of our law," Allan began, "to prevent the marriage of persons under the age of twenty-one, without the consent of parents and guardians" – (Neelie made her first entry on the side of "Bad!" "I'm only seventeen next birthday, and circumstances forbid me to confide my attachment to papa") – "it is provided that in the case of the

publication of banns of a person under twenty-one, not being a widower or widow, who are deemed emancipated" – (Neelie made another entry on the depressing side: "Allan is not a widower, and I am not a widow; consequently, we are neither of us emancipated") – "if the parent or guardian openly signifies his dissent at the time the banns are published" – ("which papa would be certain to do") – "such publication would be void. I'll take breath here if you'll allow me," said Allan. "Blackstone might put it in shorter sentences, I think, if he can't put it in fewer words. Cheer up, Neelie! there must be other ways of marrying, besides this roundabout way, that ends in a Publication and a Void. Infernal gibberish! I could write better English myself."

"We are not at the end of it yet," said Neelie. "The Void is nothing to what is to come."

"Whatever it is," rejoined Allan, "we'll treat it like a dose of physic – we'll take it at once, and be done with it." He went on reading: "And no license to marry without banns shall be granted, unless oath shall be first made by one of the parties that he or she believes that there is no impediment of kindred or alliance' – well, I can take my oath of that with a safe conscience! What next? 'And one of the said parties must, for the space of fifteen days immediately preceding such license, have had his or her usual place of abode within the parish or chapelry within which such marriage is to be solemnized! Chapelry! I'd live fifteen days in a dog-kennel with the greatest pleasure. I say, Neelie, all this seems like plain sailing enough. What are you shaking your head about? Go on, and I shall see? Oh, all right; I'll go on. Here we are: 'And where one of the said

parties, not being a widower or widow, shall be under the age of twenty-one years, oath must first be made that the consent of the person or persons whose consent is required has been obtained, or that there is no person having authority to give such consent. The consent required by this act is that of the father –” At those last formidable words Allan came to a full stop. “The consent of the father,” he repeated, with all needful seriousness of look and manner. “I couldn’t exactly swear to that, could I?”

Neelie answered in expressive silence. She handed him the pocket-book, with the final entry completed, on the side of “Bad,” in these terms: “Our marriage is impossible, unless Allan commits perjury.”

The lovers looked at each other, across the insuperable obstacle of Blackstone, in speechless dismay.

“Shut up the book,” said Neelie, resignedly. “I have no doubt we should find the police, and the prison, and the hair-cutting – all punishments for perjury, exactly as I told you! – if we looked at the next page. But we needn’t trouble ourselves to look; we have found out quite enough already. It’s all over with us. I must go to school on Saturday, and you must manage to forget me as soon as you can. Perhaps we may meet in after-life, and you may be a widower and I may be a widow, and the cruel law may consider us emancipated, when it’s too late to be of the slightest use. By that time, no doubt, I shall be old and ugly, and you will naturally have ceased to care about me, and it will all end in the grave, and the sooner the better. Good-by,” concluded Neelie, rising mournfully, with the tears

in her eyes. "It's only prolonging our misery to stop here, unless — unless you have anything to propose?"

"I've got something to propose," cried the headlong Allan. "It's an entirely new idea. Would you mind trying the blacksmith at Gretna Green?"

"No earthly consideration," answered Neelie, indignantly, "would induce me to be married by a blacksmith!"

"Don't be offended," pleaded Allan; "I meant it for the best. Lots of people in our situation have tried the blacksmith, and found him quite as good as a clergyman, and a most amiable man, I believe, into the bargain. Never mind! We must try another string to our bow."

"We haven't got another to try," said Neelie.

"Take my word for it," persisted Allan, stoutly, "there must be ways and means of circumventing Blackstone (without perjury), if we only knew of them. It's a matter of law, and we must consult somebody in the profession. I dare say it's a risk. But nothing venture, nothing have. What do you say to young Pedgift? He's a thorough good fellow. I'm sure we could trust young Pedgift to keep our secret."

"Not for worlds!" exclaimed Neelie. "You may be willing to trust your secrets to the vulgar little wretch; I won't have him trusted with mine. I hate him. No!" she concluded, with a mounting color and a peremptory stamp of her foot on the grass. "I positively forbid you to take any of the Thorpe Ambrose people into your confidence. They would instantly suspect me, and it would be all over the place in a moment. My attachment may be an unhappy one," remarked Neelie, with

her handkerchief to her eyes, "and papa may nip it in the bud, but I won't have it profaned by the town gossip!"

"Hush! hush!" said Allan. "I won't say a word at Thorpe Ambrose, I won't indeed!" He paused, and considered for a moment. "There's another way!" he burst out, brightening up on the instant. "We've got the whole week before us. I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll go to London!"

There was a sudden rustling – heard neither by one nor the other – among the trees behind them that screened Miss Gwilt. One more of the difficulties in her way (the difficulty of getting Allan to London) now promised to be removed by an act of Allan's own will.

"To London?" repeated Neelie, looking up in astonishment.

"To London!" reiterated Allan. "That's far enough away from Thorpe Ambrose, surely? Wait a minute, and don't forget that this is a question of law. Very well, I know some lawyers in London who managed all my business for me when I first came in for this property; they are just the men to consult. And if they decline to be mixed up in it, there's their head clerk, who is one of the best fellows I ever met with in my life. I asked him to go yachting with me, I remember; and, though he couldn't go, he said he felt the obligation all the same. That's the man to help us. Blackstone's a mere infant to him. Don't say it's absurd; don't say it's exactly like *me*. Do pray hear me out. I won't breathe your name or your father's. I'll describe you as 'a young lady to whom I am devotedly attached.' And if my friend the clerk asks where you live, I'll say the north of Scotland, or the west of Ireland, or the Channel Islands, or anywhere else you

like. My friend the clerk is a total stranger to Thorpe Ambrose and everybody in it (which is one recommendation); and in five minutes' time he'd put me up to what to do (which is another). If you only knew him! He's one of those extraordinary men who appear once or twice in a century – the sort of man who won't allow you to make a mistake if you try. All I have got to say to him (putting it short) is, 'My dear fellow, I want to be privately married without perjury.' All he has got to say to me (putting it short) is, 'You must do so-and-so and so-and-so, and you must be careful to avoid this, that, and the other.' I have nothing in the world to do but to follow his directions; and you have nothing in the world to do but what the bride always does when the bridegroom is ready and willing!" His arm stole round Neelie's waist, and his lips pointed the moral of the last sentence with that inarticulate eloquence which is so uniformly successful in persuading a woman against her will.

All Neelie's meditated objections dwindled, in spite of her, to one feeble little question. "Suppose I allow you to go, Allan?" she whispered, toying nervously with the stud in the bosom of his shirt. "Shall you be very long away?"

"I'll be off to-day," said Allan, "by the eleven o'clock train. And I'll be back to-morrow, if I and my friend the clerk can settle it all in time. If not, by Wednesday at latest."

"You'll write to me every day?" pleaded Neelie, clinging a little closer to him. "I shall sink under the suspense, if you don't promise to write to me every day."

Allan promised to write twice a day, if she liked – letter-writing, which was such an effort to other men, was no effort to *him!*

“And mind, whatever those people may say to you in London,” proceeded Neelie, “I insist on your coming back for me. I positively decline to run away, unless you promise to fetch me.”

Allan promised for the second time, on his sacred word of honor, and at the full compass of his voice. But Neelie was not satisfied even yet. She reverted to first principles, and insisted on knowing whether Allan was quite sure he loved her. Allan called Heaven to witness how sure he was; and got another question directly for his pains. Could he solemnly declare that he would never regret taking Neelie away from home? Allan called Heaven to witness again, louder than ever. All to no purpose! The ravenous female appetite for tender protestations still hungered for more. “I know what will happen one of these days,” persisted Neelie. “You will see some other girl who is prettier than I am; and you will wish you had married her instead of me!”

As Allan opened his lips for a final outburst of asseveration, the stable clock at the great house was faintly audible in the distance striking the hour. Neelie started guiltily. It was breakfast-time at the cottage – in other words, time to take leave. At the last moment her heart went back to her father; and her head sank on Allan’s bosom as she tried to say, Good-by. “Papa has always been so kind to me, Allan,” she whispered, holding him back tremulously when he turned to leave her. “It seems so guilty and so heartless to go away from him and be married in secret. Oh, do, do think before you really go to London; is there no way of making him a little kinder and juster to you?” The question was useless; the major’s resolutely un-

favorable reception of Allan's letter rose in Neelie's memory, and answered her as the words passed her lips. With a girl's impulsiveness she pushed Allan away before he could speak, and signed to him impatiently to go. The conflict of contending emotions, which she had mastered thus far, burst its way outward in spite of her after he had waved his hand for the last time, and had disappeared in the depths of the dell. When she turned from the place, on her side, her long-restrained tears fell freely at last, and made the lonely way back to the cottage the dimmest prospect that Neelie had seen for many a long day past.

As she hurried homeward, the leaves parted behind her, and Miss Gwilt stepped softly into the open space. She stood there in triumph, tall, beautiful, and resolute. Her lovely color brightened while she watched Neelie's retreating figure hastening lightly away from her over the grass.

"Cry, you little fool!" she said, with her quiet, clear tones, and her steady smile of contempt. "Cry as you have never cried yet! You have seen the last of your sweetheart."

CHAPTER XII A SCANDAL AT THE STATION

An hour later, the landlady at Miss Gwilt's lodgings was lost in astonishment, and the clamorous tongues of the children were in a state of ungovernable revolt. "Unforeseen circumstances" had suddenly obliged the tenant of the first floor to terminate the occupation of her apartments, and to go to London that day by the eleven o'clock train.

"Please to have a fly at the door at half-past ten," said Miss Gwilt, as the amazed landlady followed her upstairs. "And excuse me, you good creature, if I beg and pray not to be disturbed till the fly comes." Once inside the room, she locked the door, and then opened her writing-desk. "Now for my letter to the major!" she said. "How shall I word it?"

A moment's consideration apparently decided her. Searching through her collection of pens, she carefully selected the worst that could be found, and began the letter by writing the date of the day on a soiled sheet of note-paper, in crooked, clumsy characters, which ended in a blot made purposely with the feather of the pen. Pausing, sometimes to think a little, sometimes to make another blot, she completed the letter in these words:

"HON'D SIR – It is on my conscience to tell you something, which I think you ought to know. You ought to know of the goings-on of Miss, your daughter, with young Mister Armadale. I wish you to make sure, and, what is more, I advise you to be quick about it, if she is going the way you want her to go, when she takes her morning walk before breakfast. I scorn to make mischief, where there is true love on both sides. But I don't think the young man means truly by Miss. What I mean is, I think Miss only has his fancy. Another person, who shall be nameless betwixt us, has his true heart. Please to pardon my not putting my name; I am only a humble person, and it might get me into trouble. This is all at present, dear sir, from yours,
"A WELL-WISHER."

"There!" said Miss Gwilt, as she folded the letter up. "If I had been a professed novelist, I could hardly have written more naturally in the character of a servant than that!" She wrote the necessary address to Major Milroy; looked admiringly for the last time at the coarse and clumsy writing which her own delicate hand had produced; and rose to post the letter herself, before she entered next on the serious business of packing up. "Curious!" she thought, when the letter had been posted, and she was back again making her traveling preparations in her own room; "here I am, running headlong into a frightful risk – and I never was in better spirits in my life!"

The boxes were ready when the fly was at the door, and Miss Gwilt was equipped (as becomingly as usual) in her neat traveling costume. The thick veil, which she was accustomed to wear in London, appeared on her country straw bonnet for the first time. "One meets such rude men occasionally in the

railway," she said to the landlady. "And though I dress quietly, my hair is so very remarkable." She was a little paler than usual; but she had never been so sweet-tempered and engaging, so gracefully cordial and friendly, as now, when the moment of departure had come. The simple people of the house were quite moved at taking leave of her. She insisted on shaking hands with the landlord – on speaking to him in her prettiest way, and sunning him in her brightest smiles. "Come!" she said to the landlady, "you have been so kind, you have been so like a mother to me, you must give me a kiss at parting." She embraced the children all together in a lump, with a mixture of humor and tenderness delightful to see, and left a shilling among them to buy a cake. "If I was only rich enough to make it a sovereign," she whispered to the mother, "how glad I should be!" The awkward lad who ran on errands stood waiting at the fly door. He was clumsy, he was frowsy, he had a gaping mouth and a turn-up nose; but the ineradicable female delight in being charming accepted him, for all that, in the character of a last chance. "You dear, dingy John!" she said, kindly, at the carriage door. "I am so poor I have only sixpence to give you – with my very best wishes. Take my advice, John – grow to be a fine man, and find yourself a nice sweetheart! Thank you a thousand times!" She gave him a friendly little pat on the cheek with two of her gloved fingers, and smiled, and nodded, and got into the fly.

"Armadale next!" she said to herself as the carriage drove off.

Allan's anxiety not to miss the train had brought him to the station in better time than usual. After taking his ticket

and putting his portmanteau under the porter's charge, he was pacing the platform and thinking of Neelie, when he heard the rustling of a lady's dress behind him, and, turning round to look, found himself face to face with Miss Gwilt.

There was no escaping her this time. The station wall was on his right hand, and the line was on his left; a tunnel was behind him, and Miss Gwilt was in front, inquiring in her sweetest tones whether Mr. Armadale was going to London.

Allan colored scarlet with vexation and surprise. There he was obviously waiting for the train; and there was his portmanteau close by, with his name on it, already labeled for London! What answer but the true one could he make after that? Could he let the train go without him, and lose the precious hours so vitally important to Neelie and himself? Impossible! Allan helplessly confirmed the printed statement on his portmanteau, and heartily wished himself at the other end of the world as he said the words.

"How very fortunate!" rejoined Miss Gwilt. "I am going to London too. Might I ask you Mr. Armadale (as you seem to be quite alone), to be my escort on the journey?"

Allan looked at the little assembly of travelers, and travelers' friends, collected on the platform, near the booking-office door. They were all Thorpe Ambrose people. He was probably known by sight, and Miss Gwilt was probably known by sight, to every one of them. In sheer desperation, hesitating more awkwardly than ever, he produced his cigar case. "I should be delighted," he said, with an embarrassment which was almost an insult under the circumstances. "But I – I'm what the people who get sick over a cigar call a slave to smoking."

"I delight in smoking!" said Miss Gwilt, with undiminished vivacity and good humor. "It's one of the privileges of the men which I have always envied. I'm afraid, Mr. Armadale, you must think I am forcing myself on you. It certainly looks like it. The real truth is, I want particularly to say a word to you in private about Mr. Midwinter."

The train came up at the same moment. Setting Midwinter out of the question, the common decencies of politeness left Allan no alternative but to submit. After having been the cause of her leaving her situation at Major Milroy's, after having pointedly avoided her only a few days since on the high-road, to have declined going to London in the same carriage with Miss Gwilt would have been an act of downright brutality which it was simply impossible to commit. "Damn her!" said Allan, internally, as he handed his traveling companion into an empty carriage, officiously placed at his disposal, before all the people at the station, by the guard. "You shan't be disturbed, sir," the man whispered, confidentially, with a smile and a touch of his hat. Allan could have knocked him down with the utmost pleasure. "Stop!" he said, from the window. "I don't want the carriage — " It was useless; the guard was out of hearing; the whistle blew, and the train started for London.

The select assembly of travelers' friends, left behind on the platform, congregated in a circle on the spot, with the station-master in the center.

The station-master — otherwise Mr. Mack — was a popular character in the neighborhood. He possessed two social qualifications which invariably impress the average English mind — he was an old soldier, and he was a man of few words.

The conclave on the platform insisted on taking his opinion, before it committed itself positively to an opinion of its own. A brisk fire of remarks exploded, as a matter of course, on all sides; but everybody's view of the subject ended interrogatively, in a question aimed pointblank at the station-master's ears.

"She's got him, hasn't she?" "She'll come back 'Mrs. Armadale,' won't she?" "He'd better have stuck to Miss Milroy, hadn't he?" "Miss Milroy stuck to *him*. She paid him a visit at the great house, didn't she?" "Nothing of the sort; it's a shame to take the girl's character away. She was caught in a thunderstorm close by; he was obliged to give her shelter; and she's never been near the place since. Miss Gwilt's been there, if you like, with no thunderstorm to force *her* in; and Miss Gwilt's off with him to London in a carriage all to themselves, eh, Mr. Mack?" "Ah, he's a soft one, that Armadale! with all his money, to take up with a red-haired woman, a good eight or nine years older than he is! She's thirty if she's a day. That's what I say, Mr. Mack. What do you say?" "Older or younger, she'll rule the roast at Thorpe Ambrose; and I say, for the sake of the place, and for the sake of trade, let's make the best of it; and Mr. Mack, as a man of the world, sees it in the same light as I do, don't you, sir?"

"Gentlemen," said the station-master, with his abrupt military accent, and his impenetrable military manner, "she's a devilish fine woman. And when I was Mr. Armadale's age, it's my opinion, if her fancy had laid that way, she might have married Me."

With that expression of opinion the station-master wheeled to the right, and entrenched himself impregably in the stronghold of his own office.

The citizens of Thorpe Ambrose looked at the closed door, and gravely shook their heads. Mr. Mack had disappointed them. No opinion which openly recognizes the frailty of human nature is ever a popular opinion with mankind. "It's as good as saying that any of *us* might have married her if *we* had been Mr. Armadale's age!" Such was the general impression on the minds of the conclave, when the meeting had been adjourned, and the members were leaving the station.

The last of the party to go was a slow old gentleman, with a habit of deliberately looking about him. Pausing at the door, this observant person stared up the platform and down the platform, and discovered in the latter direction, standing behind an angle of the wall, an elderly man in black, who had escaped the notice of everybody up to that time. "Why, bless my soul!" said the old gentleman, advancing inquisitively by a step at a time, "it can't be Mr. Bashwood!"

It *was* Mr. Bashwood — Mr. Bashwood, whose constitutional curiosity had taken him privately to the station, bent on solving the mystery of Allan's sudden journey to London — Mr. Bashwood, who had seen and heard, behind his angle in the wall, what everybody else had seen and heard, and who appeared to have been impressed by it in no ordinary way. He stood stiffly against the wall, like a man petrified, with one hand pressed on his bare head, and the other holding his hat — he stood, with a dull flush on his face, and a dull stare in his eyes, looking straight into the black depths of the tunnel

outside the station, as if the train to London had disappeared in it but the moment before.

"Is your head bad?" asked the old gentleman. "Take my advice. Go home and lie down."

Mr. Bashwood listened mechanically, with his usual attention, and answered mechanically, with his usual politeness.

"Yes, sir," he said, in a low, lost tone, like a man between dreaming and waking; "I'll go home and lie down."

"That's right," rejoined the old gentleman, making for the door. "And take a pill, Mr. Bashwood — take a pill."

Five minutes later, the porter charged with the business of locking up the station found Mr. Bashwood, still standing bare-headed against the wall, and still looking straight into the black depths of the tunnel, as if the train to London had disappeared in it but a moment since.

"Come, sir!" said the porter; "I must lock up. Are you out of sorts? Anything wrong with your inside? Try a drop of gin-and-bitters."

"Yes," said Mr. Bashwood, answering the porter, exactly as he had answered the old gentleman; "I'll try a drop of gin-and-bitters."

The porter took him by the arm, and led him out. "You'll get it there," said the man, pointing confidentially to a public-house; "and you'll get it good."

"I shall get it there," echoed Mr. Bashwood, still mechanically repeating what was said to him; "and I shall get it good."

His will seemed to be paralyzed; his actions depended absolutely on what other people told him to do. He took a few

steps in the direction of the public-house, hesitated, staggered, and caught at the pillar of one of the station lamps near him.

The porter followed, and took him by the arm once more.

"Why, you've been drinking already!" exclaimed the man, with a suddenly quickened interest in Mr. Bashwood's case. "What was it? Beer?"

Mr. Bashwood, in his low, lost tones, echoed the last word.

It was close on the porter's dinner-time. But, when the lower orders of the English people believe they have discovered an intoxicated man, their sympathy with him is boundless. The porter let his dinner take its chance, and carefully assisted Mr. Bashwood to reach the public-house. "Gin-and-bitters will put you on your legs again," whispered this Samaritan setter-right of the alcoholic disasters of mankind.

If Mr. Bashwood had really been intoxicated, the effect of the porter's remedy would have been marvelous indeed. Almost as soon as the glass was emptied, the stimulant did its work. The long-weakened nervous system of the deputy-steward, prostrated for the moment by the shock that had fallen on it, rallied again like a weary horse under the spur. The dull flush on his cheeks, the dull stare in his eyes, disappeared simultaneously. After a momentary effort, he recovered memory enough of what had passed to thank the porter, and to ask whether he would take something himself. The worthy creature instantly accepted a dose of his own remedy – in the capacity of a preventive – and went home to dinner as only those men can go home who are physically warmed by gin-and-bitters and morally elevated by the performance of a good action.

Still strangely abstracted (but conscious now of the way by which he went), Mr. Bashwood left the public-house a few minutes later, in his turn. He walked on mechanically, in his dreary black garments, moving like a blot on the white surface of the sun-brightened road, as Midwinter had seen him move in the early days at Thorpe Ambrose, when they had first met. Arrived at the point where he had to choose between the way that led into the town and the way that led to the great house, he stopped, incapable of deciding, and careless, apparently, even of making the attempt. "I'll be revenged on her!" he whispered to himself, still absorbed in his jealous frenzy of rage against the woman who had deceived him. "I'll be revenged on her," he repeated, in louder tones, "if I spend every half-penny I've got!"

Some women of the disorderly sort, passing on their way to the town, heard him. "Ah, you old brute," they called out, with the measureless license of their class, "whatever she did, she served you right!"

The coarseness of the voices startled him, whether he comprehended the words or not. He shrank away from more interruption and more insult, into the quieter road that led to the great house.

At a solitary place by the wayside he stopped and sat down. He took off his hat and lifted his youthful wig a little from his bald old head, and tried desperately to get beyond the one immovable conviction which lay on his mind like lead – the conviction that Miss Gwilt had been purposely deceiving him from the first. It was useless. No effort would free him from that one dominant impression, and from the one answering

idea that it had evoked – the idea of revenge. He got up again, and put on his hat and walked rapidly forward a little way – then turned without knowing why, and slowly walked back again “If I had only dressed a little smarter!” said the poor wretch, helplessly. “If I had only been a little bolder with her, she might have overlooked my being an old man!” The angry fit returned on him. He clinched his clammy, trembling hands, and shook them fiercely in the empty air. “I’ll be revenged on her,” he reiterated. “I’ll be revenged on her, if I spend every half-penny I’ve got!” It was terribly suggestive of the hold she had taken on him, that his vindictive sense of injury could not get far enough away from her to reach the man whom he believed to be his rival, even yet. In his rage, as in his love, he was absorbed, body and soul, by Miss Gwilt.

In a moment more, the noise of running wheels approaching from behind startled him. He turned and looked round. There was Mr. Pedgift the elder, rapidly overtaking him in the gig, just as Mr. Pedgift had overtaken him once already, on that former occasion when he had listened under the window at the great house, and when the lawyer had bluntly charged him with feeling a curiosity about Miss Gwilt!

In an instant the inevitable association of ideas burst on his mind. The opinion of Miss Gwilt, which he had heard the lawyer express to Allan at parting, flashed back into his memory, side by side with Mr. Pedgift’s sarcastic approval of anything in the way of inquiry which his own curiosity might attempt. “I may be even with her yet,” he thought, “if Mr. Pedgift will help me! – Stop, sir!” he called out, desperately, as the gig came up with him. “If you please, sir, I want to speak to you.”

Pedgift Senior slackened the pace of his fast-trotting mare, without pulling up. "Come to the office in half an hour," he said; "I'm busy now." Without waiting for an answer, without noticing Mr. Bashwood's bow, he gave the mare the rein again, and was out of sight in another minute.

Mr. Bashwood sat down once more in a shady place by the roadside. He appeared to be incapable of feeling any slight but the one unpardonable slight put upon him by Miss Gwilt. He not only declined to resent, he even made the best of Mr. Pedgift's unceremonious treatment of him. "Half an hour," he said, resignedly. "Time enough to compose myself; and I want time. Very kind of Mr. Pedgift, though he mightn't have meant it."

The sense of oppression in his head forced him once again to remove his hat. He sat with it on his lap, deep in thought; his face bent low, and the wavering fingers of one hand drumming absently on the crown of the hat. If Mr. Pedgift the elder, seeing him as he sat now, could only have looked a little way into the future, the monotonously drumming hand of the deputy-steward might have been strong enough, feeble as it was, to stop the lawyer by the roadside. It was the worn, weary, miserable old hand of a worn, weary, miserable old man; but it was, for all that (to use the language of Mr. Pedgift's own parting prediction to Allan), the hand that was now destined to "let the light in on Miss Gwilt."

CHAPTER XIII AN OLD MAN'S HEART

Punctual to the moment, when the half hour's interval had expired, Mr. Bashwood was announced at the office as waiting to see Mr. Pedgift by special appointment.

The lawyer looked up from his papers with an air of annoyance: he had totally forgotten the meeting by the roadside. "See what he wants," said Pedgift Senior to Pedgift Junior, working in the same room with him. "And if it's nothing of importance, put it off to some other time."

Pedgift Junior swiftly disappeared and swiftly returned.

"Well?" asked the father.

"Well," answered the son, "he is rather more shaky and unintelligible than usual. I can make nothing out of him, except that he persists in wanting to see you. My own idea," pursued Pedgift Junior, with his usual, sardonic gravity, "is that he is going to have a fit, and that he wishes to acknowledge your uniform kindness to him by obliging you with a private view of the whole proceeding."

Pedgift Senior habitually matched everybody – his son included – with their own weapons. "Be good enough to remember, Augustus," he rejoined, "that my Room is not a Court of

Law. A bad joke is not invariably followed by 'roars of laughter' *here*. Let Mr. Bashwood come in."

Mr. Bashwood was introduced, and Pedgift Junior withdrew. "You mustn't bleed him, sir," whispered the incorrigible joker, as he passed the back of his father's chair. "Hot-water bottles to the soles of his feet, and a mustard plaster on the pit of his stomach — that's the modern treatment."

"Sit down, Bashwood," said Pedgift Senior when they were alone. "And don't forget that time's money. Out with it, whatever it is, at the quickest possible rate, and in the fewest possible words."

These preliminary directions, bluntly but not at all unkindly spoken, rather increased than diminished the painful agitation under which Mr. Bashwood was suffering. He stammered more helplessly, he trembled more continuously than usual, as he made his little speech of thanks, and added his apologies at the end for intruding on his patron in business hours.

"Everybody in the place, Mr. Pedgift, sir, knows your time is valuable. Oh, dear, yes! oh, dear, yes! most valuable, most valuable! Excuse me, sir, I'm coming out with it. Your goodness — or rather your business — no, your goodness gave me half an hour to wait — and I have thought of what I had to say, and prepared it, and put it short." Having got as far as that, he stopped with a pained, bewildered look. He had put it away in his memory, and now, when the time came, he was too confused to find it. And there was Mr. Pedgift mutely waiting; his face and manner expressive alike of that silent sense of the value of his own time which every patient who has visited a great

doctor, every client who has consulted a lawyer in large practice, knows so well. "Have you heard the news, sir?" stammered Mr. Bashwood, shifting his ground in despair, and letting the uppermost idea in his mind escape him, simply because it was the one idea in him that was ready to come out.

"Does it concern *me*?" asked Pedgift Senior, mercilessly brief, and mercilessly straight in coming to the point.

"It concerns a lady, sir – no, not a lady – a young man, I ought to say, in whom you used to feel some interest. Oh, Mr. Pedgift, sir, what do you think! Mr. Armadale and Miss Gwilt have gone up to London together to-day – alone, sir – alone in a carriage reserved for their two selves. Do you think he's going to marry her? Do you really think, like the rest of them, he's going to marry her?"

He put the question with a sudden flush in his face and a sudden energy in his manner. His sense of the value of the lawyer's time, his conviction of the greatness of the lawyer's condescension, his constitutional shyness and timidity – all yielded together to his one overwhelming interest in hearing Mr. Pedgift's answer. He was loud for the first time in his life in putting the question.

"After my experience of Mr. Armadale," said the lawyer, instantly hardening in look and manner, "I believe him to be infatuated enough to marry Miss Gwilt a dozen times over, if Miss Gwilt chose to ask him. Your news doesn't surprise me in the least, Bashwood. I'm sorry for him. I can honestly say that, though he *has* set my advice at defiance. And I'm more sorry still," he continued, softening again as his mind reverted to his interview with Neelie under the trees of the park – "I'm more

sorry still for another person who shall be nameless. But what have I to do with all this? And what on earth is the matter with you?" he resumed, noticing for the first time the abject misery in Mr. Bashwood's manner, the blank despair in Mr. Bashwood's face, which his answer had produced. "Are you ill? Is there something behind the curtain that you're afraid to bring out? I don't understand it. Have you come here – here in my private room, in business hours – with nothing to tell me but that young Armadale has been fool enough to ruin his prospects for life? Why, I foresaw it all weeks since, and what is more, I as good as told him so at the last conversation I had with him in the great house."

At those last words, Mr. Bashwood suddenly rallied. The lawyer's passing reference to the great house had led him back in a moment to the purpose that he had in view.

"That's it, sir!" he said, eagerly; "that's what I wanted to speak to you about; that's what I've been preparing in my mind. Mr. Pedgift, sir, the last time you were at the great house, when you came away in your gig, you – you overtook me on the drive."

"I dare say I did," remarked Pedgift, resignedly. "My mare happens to be a trifle quicker on her legs than you are on yours, Bashwood. Go on, go on. We shall come in time, I suppose, to what you are driving at."

"You stopped, and spoke to me, sir," proceeded Mr. Bashwood, advancing more and more eagerly to his end. "You said you suspected me of feeling some curiosity about Miss Gwilt, and you told me (I remember the exact words, sir) – you told me to gratify my curiosity by all means, for you didn't object to it."

Pedgift Senior began for the first time to look interested in hearing more.

"I remember something of the sort," he replied; "and I also remember thinking it rather remarkable that you should *happen* – we won't put it in any more offensive way – to be exactly under Mr. Armadale's open window while I was talking to him. It might have been accident, of course; but it looked rather more like curiosity. I could only judge by appearances," concluded Pedgift, pointing his sarcasm with a pinch of snuff; "and appearances, Bashwood, were decidedly against you."

"I don't deny it, sir. I only mentioned the circumstance because I wished to acknowledge that I *was* curious, and *am* curious about Miss Gwilt."

"Why?" asked Pedgift Senior, seeing something under the surface in Mr. Bashwood's face and manner, but utterly in the dark thus far as to what that something might be.

There was silence for a moment. The moment passed, Mr. Bashwood took the refuge usually taken by nervous, unready men, placed in his circumstances, when they are at a loss for an answer. He simply reiterated the assertion that he had just made. "I feel some curiosity sir," he said, with a strange mixture of doggedness and timidity, "about Miss Gwilt."

There was another moment of silence. In spite of his practiced acuteness and knowledge of the world, the lawyer was more puzzled than ever. The case of Mr. Bashwood presented the one human riddle of all others which he was least qualified to solve. Though year after year witnesses in thousands and thousands of cases, the remorseless disinheriting of nearest and dearest relations, the unnatural breaking-up of sacred

family ties, the deplorable severance of old and firm friendships, due entirely to the intense self-absorption which the sexual passion can produce when it enters the heart of an old man, the association of love with infirmity and gray hairs arouses, nevertheless, all the world over, no other idea than the idea of extravagant improbability or extravagant absurdity in the general mind. If the interview now taking place in Mr. Pedgift's consulting-room had taken place at his dinner-table instead, when wine had opened his mind to humorous influences, it is possible that he might, by this time, have suspected the truth. But, in his business hours, Pedgift Senior was in the habit of investigating men's motives seriously from the business point of view; and he was on that very account simply incapable of conceiving any improbability so startling, any absurdity so enormous, as the absurdity and improbability of Mr. Bashwood's being in love.

Some men in the lawyer's position would have tried to force their way to enlightenment by obstinately repeating the unanswered question. Pedgift Senior wisely postponed the question until he had moved the conversation on another step. "Well," he resumed, "let us say you feel a curiosity about Miss Gwilt. What next?"

The palms of Mr. Bashwood's hands began to moisten under the influence of his agitation, as they had moistened in the past days when he had told the story of his domestic sorrows to Midwinter at the great house. Once more he rolled his handkerchief into a ball, and dabbed it softly to and fro from one hand to the other.

"May I ask if I am right, sir," he began, "in believing that you have a very unfavorable opinion of Miss Gwilt? You are quite convinced, I think –"

"My good fellow," interrupted Pedgift Senior, "why need you be in any doubt about it? You were under Mr. Armadale's open window all the while I was talking to him; and your ears, I presume, were not absolutely shut."

Mr. Bashwood showed no sense of the interruption. The little sting of the lawyer's sarcasm was lost in the nobler pain that wrung him from the wound inflicted by Miss Gwilt.

"You are quite convinced, I think, sir," he resumed, "that there are circumstances in this lady's past life which would be highly discreditable to her if they were discovered at the present time?"

"The window was open at the great house, Bashwood; and your ears, I presume, were not absolutely shut."

Still impenetrable to the sting, Mr. Bashwood persisted more obstinately than ever.

"Unless I am greatly mistaken," he said, "your long experience in such things has even suggested to you, sir, that Miss Gwilt might turn out to be known to the police?"

Pedgift Senior's patience gave way. "You have been over ten minutes in this room," he broke out. "Can you, or can you not, tell me in plain English what you want?"

In plain English – with the passion that had transformed him, the passion which (in Miss Gwilt's own words) had made a man of him, burning in his haggard cheeks – Mr. Bashwood met the challenge, and faced the lawyer (as, the worried sheep faces the dog) on his own ground.

"I wish to say, sir," he answered, "that your opinion in this matter is my opinion too. I believe there is something wrong in Miss Gwilt's past life which she keeps concealed from everybody, and I want to be the man who knows it."

Pedgift Senior saw his chance, and instantly reverted to the question that he had postponed. "Why?" he asked for the second time.

For the second time Mr. Bashwood hesitated.

Could he acknowledge that he had been mad enough to love her, and mean enough to be a spy for her? Could he say, She has deceived me from the first, and she has deserted me, now her object is served. After robbing me of my happiness, robbing me of my honor, robbing me of my last hope left in life, she has gone from me forever, and left me nothing but my old man's longing, slow and sly, and strong and changeless, for revenge. Revenge that I may have, if I can poison her success by dragging her frailties into the public view. Revenge that I will buy (for what is gold or what is life to me?) with the last farthing of my hoarded money and the last drop of my stagnant blood. Could he say that to the man who sat waiting for his answer? No; he could only crush it down and be silent.

The lawyer's expression began to harden once more.

"One of us must speak out," he said; "and as you evidently won't, I will. I can only account for this extraordinary anxiety of yours to make yourself acquainted with Miss Gwilt's secrets, in one of two ways. Your motive is either an excessively mean one (no offense, Bashwood, I am only putting the case), or an excessively generous one. After my experience of your honest character and your creditable conduct, it is only your due that

I should absolve you at once of the mean motive. I believe you are as incapable as I am – I can say no more – of turning to mercenary account any discoveries you might make to Miss Gwilt's prejudice in Miss Gwilt's past life. Shall I go on any further? or would you prefer, on second thoughts, opening your mind frankly to me of your own accord?"

"I should prefer not interrupting you, sir," said Mr. Bashwood.

"As you please," pursued Pedgift Senior. "Having absolved you of the mean motive, I come to the generous motive next. It is possible that you are an unusually grateful man; and it is certain that Mr. Armadale has been remarkably kind to you. After employing you under Mr. Midwinter, in the steward's office, he has had confidence enough in your honesty and your capacity, now his friend has left him, to put his business entirely and unreservedly in your hands. It's not in my experience of human nature – but it may be possible, nevertheless – that you are so gratefully sensible of that confidence, and so gratefully interested in your employer's welfare, that you can't see him, in his friendless position, going straight to his own disgrace and ruin, without making an effort to save him. To put it in two words. Is it your idea that Mr. Armadale might be prevented from marrying Miss Gwilt, if he could be informed in time of her real character? And do you wish to be the man who opens his eyes to the truth? If that is the case –"

He stopped in astonishment. Acting under some uncontrollable impulse, Mr. Bashwood had started to his feet. He stood, with his withered face lit up by a sudden irradiation from within, which made him look younger than his age by

a good twenty years – he stood, gasping for breath enough to speak, and gesticulated entreatingly at the lawyer with both hands.

“Say it again, sir!” he burst out, eagerly, recovering his breath before Pedgift Senior had recovered his surprise. “The question about Mr. Armadale, sir! – only once more! – only once more, Mr. Pedgift, please!”

With his practiced observation closely and distrustfully at work on Mr. Bashwood’s face, Pedgift Senior motioned to him to sit down again, and put the question for the second time.

“Do I think,” said Mr. Bashwood, repeating the sense, but not the words of the question, “that Mr. Armadale might be parted from Miss Gwilt, if she could be shown to him as she really is? Yes, sir! And do I wish to be the man who does it? Yes, sir! yes, sir!! yes, sir!!!”

“It’s rather strange,” remarked the lawyer, looking at him more and more distrustfully, “that you should be so violently agitated, simply because my question happens to have hit the mark.”

The question happened to have hit a mark which Pedgift little dreamed of. It had released Mr. Bashwood’s mind in an instant from the dead pressure of his one dominant idea of revenge, and had shown him a purpose to be achieved by the discovery of Miss Gwilt’s secrets which had never occurred to him till that moment. The marriage which he had blindly regarded as inevitable was a marriage that might be stopped – not in Allan’s interests, but in his own – and the woman whom he believed that he had lost might yet, in spite of circumstances, be a woman won! His brain whirled as he thought of it. His

own roused resolution almost daunted him, by its terrible incongruity with all the familiar habits of his mind, and all the customary proceedings of his life.

Finding his last remark unanswered, Pedgift Senior considered a little before he said anything more.

"One thing is clear," reasoned the lawyer with himself. "His true motive in this matter is a motive which he is afraid to avow. My question evidently offered him a chance of misleading me, and he has accepted it on the spot. That's enough for me. If I was Mr. Armadale's lawyer, the mystery might be worth investigating. As things are, it's no interest of mine to hunt Mr. Bashwood from one lie to another till I run him to earth at last. I have nothing whatever to do with it; and I shall leave him free to follow his own roundabout courses, in his own roundabout way." Having arrived at that conclusion, Pedgift Senior pushed back his chair, and rose briskly to terminate the interview.

"Don't be alarmed, Bashwood," he began. "The subject of our conversation is a subject exhausted, so far as I am concerned. I have only a few last words to say, and it's a habit of mine, as you know, to say my last words on my legs. Whatever else I may be in the dark about, I have made one discovery, at any rate. I have found out what you really want with me – at last! You want me to help you."

"If you would be so very, very kind, sir!" stammered Mr. Bashwood. "If you would only give me the great advantage of your opinion and advice."

"Wait a bit, Bashwood. We will separate those two things, if you please. A lawyer may offer an opinion like any other

man; but when a lawyer gives his advice – by the Lord Harry, sir, it's Professional! You're welcome to my opinion in this matter; I have disguised it from nobody. I believe there have been events in Miss Gwilt's career which (if they could be discovered) would even make Mr. Armadale, infatuated as he is, afraid to marry her – supposing, of course, that he really *is* going to marry her; for, though the appearances are in favor of it so far, it is only an assumption, after all. As to the mode of proceeding by which the blots on this woman's character might or might not be brought to light in time – she may be married by license in a fortnight if she likes – *that* is a branch of the question on which I positively decline to enter. It implies speaking in my character as a lawyer, and giving you, what I decline positively to give you, my professional advice.”

“Oh, sir, don't say that!” pleaded Mr. Bashwood. “Don't deny me the great favor, the inestimable advantage of your advice! I have such a poor head, Mr. Pedgift! I am so old and so slow, sir, and I get so sadly startled and worried when I'm thrown out of my ordinary ways. It's quite natural you should be a little impatient with me for taking up your time – I know that time is money, to a clever man like you. Would you excuse me – would you please excuse me, if I venture to say that I have saved a little something, a few pounds, sir; and being quite lonely, with nobody dependent on me, I'm sure I may spend my savings as I please?” Blind to every consideration but the one consideration of propitiating Mr. Pedgift, he took out a dingy, ragged old pocket-book, and tried, with trembling fingers, to open it on the lawyer's table.

“Put your pocket-book back directly,” said Pedgift Senior. “Richer men than you have tried that argument with me, and have found that there is such a thing (off the stage) as a lawyer who is not to be bribed. I will have nothing to do with the case, under existing circumstances. If you want to know why, I beg to inform you that Miss Gwilt ceased to be professionally interesting to me on the day when I ceased to be Mr. Armadale’s lawyer. I may have other reasons besides, which I don’t think it necessary to mention. The reason already given is explicit enough. Go your own way, and take your responsibility on your own shoulders. You *may* venture within reach of Miss Gwilt’s claws and come out again without being scratched. Time will show. In the meanwhile, I wish you good-morning — and I own, to my shame, that I never knew till to-day what a hero you were.”

This time, Mr. Bashwood felt the sting. Without another word of expostulation or entreaty, without even saying “Good-morning” on his side, he walked to the door, opened it, softly, and left the room.

The parting look in his face, and the sudden silence that had fallen on him, were not lost on Pedgift Senior. “Bashwood will end badly,” said the lawyer, shuffling his papers, and returning impenetrably to his interrupted work.

The change in Mr. Bashwood’s face and manner to something dogged and self-contained was so startlingly uncharacteristic of him, that it even forced itself on the notice of Pedgift Junior and the clerks as he passed through the outer office. Accustomed to make the old man their butt, they took a boisterously comic view of the marked alteration in him. Deaf to the

merciless raillery with which he was assailed on all sides, he stopped opposite young Pedgift, and, looking him attentively in the face, said, in a quiet, absent manner, like a man thinking aloud, "I wonder whether *you* would help me?"

"Open an account instantly," said Pedgift Junior to the clerks, "in the name of Mr. Bashwood. Place a chair for Mr. Bashwood, with a footstool close by, in case he wants it. Supply me with a quire of extra double-wove satin paper, and a gross of picked quills, to take notes of Mr. Bashwood's case; and inform my father instantly that I am going to leave him and set up in business for myself, on the strength of Mr. Bashwood's patronage. Take a seat, sir, pray take a seat, and express your feelings freely."

Still impenetrably deaf to the raillery of which he was the object, Mr. Bashwood waited until Pedgift Junior had exhausted himself, and then turned quietly away.

"I ought to have known better," he said, in the same absent manner as before. "He is his father's son all over — he would make game of me on my death-bed." He paused a moment at the door, mechanically brushing his hat with his hand, and went out into the street.

The bright sunshine dazzled his eyes, the passing vehicles and foot-passengers startled and bewildered him. He shrank into a by-street, and put his hand over his eyes. "I'd better go home," he thought, "and shut myself up, and think about it in my own room."

His lodging was in a small house, in the poor quarter of the town. He let himself in with his key, and stole softly upstairs. The one little room he possessed met him cruelly, look round

it where he might, with silent memorials of Miss Gwilt. On the chimney-piece were the flowers she had given him at various times, all withered long since, and all preserved on a little china pedestal, protected by a glass shade. On the wall hung a wretched colored print of a woman, which he had caused to be nicely framed and glazed, because there was a look in it that reminded him of her face. In his clumsy old mahogany writing-desk were the few letters, brief and peremptory, which she had written to him at the time when he was watching and listening meanly at Thorpe Ambrose to please *her*. And when, turning his back on these, he sat down wearily on his sofa-bedstead — there, hanging over one end of it, was the gaudy cravat of blue satin, which he had bought because she had told him she liked bright colors, and which he had never yet had the courage to wear, though he had taken it out morning after morning with the resolution to put it on! Habitually quiet in his actions, habitually restrained in his language, he now seized the cravat as if it was a living thing that could feel, and flung it to the other end of the room with an oath.

The time passed; and still, though his resolution to stand between Miss Gwilt and her marriage remained unbroken, he was as far as ever from discovering the means which might lead him to his end. The more he thought and thought of it, the darker and the darker his course in the future looked to him.

He rose again, as wearily as he had sat down, and went to his cupboard. "I'm feverish and thirsty," he said; "a cup of tea may help me." He opened his canister, and measured out his small allowance of tea, less carefully than usual. "Even my own

hands won't serve me to-day!" he thought, as he scraped together the few grains of tea that he had spilled, and put them carefully back in the canister.

In that fine summer weather, the one fire in the house was the kitchen fire. He went downstairs for the boiling water, with his teapot in his hand.

Nobody but the landlady was in the kitchen. She was one of the many English matrons whose path through this world is a path of thorns; and who take a dismal pleasure, whenever the opportunity is afforded them, in inspecting the scratched and bleeding feet of other people in a like condition with themselves. Her one vice was of the lighter sort — the vice of curiosity; and among the many counterbalancing virtues she possessed was the virtue of greatly respecting Mr. Bashwood, as a lodger whose rent was regularly paid, and whose ways were always quiet and civil from one year's end to another.

"What did you please to want, sir?" asked the landlady. "Boiling water, is it? Did you ever know the water boil, Mr. Bashwood, when you wanted it? Did you ever see a sulkier fire than that? I'll put a stick or two in, if you'll wait a little, and give me the chance. Dear, dear me, you'll excuse my mentioning it, sir, but how poorly you do look to-day!"

The strain on Mr. Bashwood's mind was beginning to tell. Something of the helplessness which he had shown at the station appeared again in his face and manner as he put his teapot on the kitchen table and sat down.

"I'm in trouble, ma'am," he said, quietly; "and I find trouble gets harder to bear than it used to be."

"Ah, you may well say that!" groaned the landlady. "I'm ready for the undertaker, Mr. Bashwood, when *my* time comes, whatever you may be. You're too lonely, sir. When you're in trouble, it's some help – though not much – to shift a share of it off on another person's shoulders. If your good lady had only been alive now, sir, what a comfort you would have found her, wouldn't you?"

A momentary spasm of pain passed across Mr. Bashwood's face. The landlady had ignorantly recalled him to the misfortunes of his married life. He had been long since forced to quiet her curiosity about his family affairs by telling her that he was a widower, and that his domestic circumstances had not been happy ones; but he had taken her no further into his confidence than this. The sad story which he had related to Midwinter, of his drunken wife who had ended her miserable life in a lunatic asylum, was a story which he had shrunk from confiding to the talkative woman, who would have confided it in her turn to every one else in the house.

"What I always say to my husband when he's low, sir," pursued the landlady, intent on the kettle, "is, 'What would you do *now*, Sam, without me? When his temper don't get the better of him (it will boil directly, Mr. Bashwood), he says, 'Elizabeth, I could do nothing.' When his temper does get the better of him, he says, 'I should try the public-house, missus; and I'll try it now.' Ah, I've got *my* troubles! A man with grown-up sons and daughters tipping in a public-house! I don't call to mind, Mr. Bashwood, whether *you* ever had any sons and daughters? And yet, now I think of it, I seem to fancy you said yes, you had.

Daughters, sir, weren't they? and, ah, dear! dear! to be sure! all dead."

"I had one daughter, ma'am," said Mr. Bashwood, patiently — "only one, who died before she was a year old."

"Only one!" repeated the sympathizing landlady. "It's as near boiling as it ever will be, sir; give me the tea-pot. Only one! Ah, it comes heavier (don't it?) when it's an only child? You said it was an only child, I think, didn't you, sir?"

For a moment, Mr. Bashwood looked at the woman with vacant eyes, and without attempting to answer her. After ignorantly recalling the memory of the wife who had disgraced him, she was now, as ignorantly, forcing him back on the miserable remembrance of the son who had ruined and deserted him. For the first time, since he had told his story to Midwinter, at their introductory interview in the great house, his mind reverted once more to the bitter disappointment and disaster of the past. Again he thought of the bygone days, when he had become security for his son, and when that son's dishonesty had forced him to sell everything he possessed to pay the forfeit that was exacted when the forfeit was due. "I have a son, ma'am," he said, becoming conscious that the landlady was looking at him in mute and melancholy surprise. "I did my best to help him forward in the world, and he has behaved very badly to me."

"Did he, now?" rejoined the landlady, with an appearance of the greatest interest. "Behaved badly to you — almost broke your heart, didn't he? Ah, it will come home to him, sooner or later. Don't you fear! 'Honor your father and mother,' wasn't

put on Moses's tables of stone for nothing, Mr. Bashwood. Where may he be, and what is he doing now, sir?"

The question was in effect almost the same as the question which Midwinter had put when the circumstances had been described to him. As Mr. Bashwood had answered it on the former occasion, so (in nearly the same words) he answered it now.

"My son is in London, ma'am, for all I know to the contrary. He was employed, when I last heard of him, in no very creditable way, at the Private Inquiry Office —"

At those words he suddenly checked himself. His face flushed, his eyes brightened; he pushed away the cup which had just been filled for him, and rose from his seat. The landlady started back a step. There was something in her lodger's face that she had never seen in it before.

"I hope I've not offended you, sir," said the woman, recovering her self-possession, and looking a little too ready to take offense on her side, at a moment's notice.

"Far from it, ma'am, far from it!" he rejoined, in a strangely eager, hurried way. "I have just remembered something — something very important. I must go upstairs — it's a letter, a letter, a letter. I'll come back to my tea, ma'am. I beg your pardon, I'm much obliged to you, you've been very kind — I'll say good-by, if you'll allow me, for the present." To the landlady's amazement, he cordially shook hands with her, and made for the door, leaving tea and tea-pot to take care of themselves.

The moment he reached his own room, he locked himself in. For a little while he stood holding by the chimney-piece, waiting to recover his breath. The moment he could move

again, he opened his writing-desk on the table. "That for you, Mr. Pedgift and Son!" he said, with a snap of his fingers as he sat down. "I've got a son too!"

There was a knock at the door – a knock, soft, considerate, and confidential. The anxious landlady wished to know whether Mr. Bashwood was ill, and begged to intimate for the second time that she earnestly trusted she had given him no offense.

"No! no!" he called through the door. "I'm quite well – I'm writing, ma'am, I'm writing – please to excuse me. She's a good woman; she's an excellent woman," he thought, when the landlady had retired. "I'll make her a little present. My mind's so unsettled, I might never have thought of it but for her. Oh, if my boy is at the office still! Oh, if I can only write a letter that will make him pity me!"

He took up his pen, and sat thinking anxiously, thinking long, before he touched the paper. Slowly, with many patient pauses to think and think again, and with more than ordinary care to make his writing legible, he traced these lines:

"MY DEAR JAMES – You will be surprised, I am afraid, to see my handwriting. Pray don't suppose I am going to ask you for money, or to reproach you for having sold me out of house and home when you forfeited your security, and I had to pay. I am willing and anxious to let by-gones be by-gones, and to forget the past.

"It is in your power (if you are still at the Private Inquiry Office) to do me a great service. I am in sore anxiety and trouble on the subject of a person in whom I am interested. The

person is a lady. Please don't make game of me for confessing this, if you can help it. If you knew what I am now suffering, I think you would be more inclined to pity than to make game of me.

"I would enter into particulars, only I know your quick temper, and I fear exhausting your patience. Perhaps it may be enough to say that I have reason to believe the lady's past life has not been a very creditable one, and that I am interested – more interested than words can tell – in finding out what her life has really been, and in making the discovery within a fortnight from the present time.

"Though I know very little about the ways of business in an office like yours, I can understand that, without first having the lady's present address, nothing can be done to help me. Unfortunately, I am not yet acquainted with her present address. I only know that she went to town to-day, accompanied by a gentleman, in whose employment I now am, and who (as I believe) will be likely to write to me for money before many days more are over his head.

"Is this circumstance of a nature to help us? I venture to say 'us,' because I count already, my dear boy, on your kind assistance and advice. Don't let money stand between us; I have saved a little something, and it is all freely at your disposal. Pray, pray write to me by return of post! If you will only try your best to end the dreadful suspense under which I am now suffering, you will atone for all the grief and disappointment you caused me in times that are past, and you will confer an obligation that he will never forget on

"Your affectionate father,

"FELIX BASHWOOD."

After waiting a little, to dry his eyes, Mr. Bashwood added the date and address, and directed the letter to his son, at "The Private Inquiry Office, Shadyside Place, London." That done, he went out at once, and posted his letter with his own hands. It was then Monday; and, if the answer was sent by return of post, the answer would be received on Wednesday morning.

The interval day, the Tuesday, was passed by Mr. Bashwood in the steward's office at the great house. He had a double motive for absorbing himself as deeply as might be in the various occupations connected with the management of the estate. In the first place, employment helped him to control the devouring impatience with which he looked for the coming of the next day. In the second place, the more forward he was with the business of the office, the more free he would be to join his son in London, without attracting suspicion to himself by openly neglecting the interests placed under his charge.

Toward the Tuesday afternoon, vague rumors of something wrong at the cottage found their way (through Major Milroy's servants) to the servants at the great house, and attempted ineffectually through this latter channel to engage the attention of Mr. Bashwood, impenetrably fixed on other things. The major and Miss Neelie had been shut up together in mysterious conference; and Miss Neelie's appearance after the close of the interview plainly showed that she had been crying. This had happened on the Monday afternoon; and on the next day (that present Tuesday) the major had startled the household by announcing briefly that his daughter wanted a change to the air of the seaside, and that he proposed taking her himself, by the

next train, to Lowestoft. The two had gone away together, both very serious and silent, but both, apparently, very good friends, for all that. Opinions at the great house attributed this domestic revolution to the reports current on the subject of Allan and Miss Gwilt. Opinions at the cottage rejected that solution of the difficulty, on practical grounds. Miss Neelie had remained inaccessibly shut up in her own room, from the Monday afternoon to the Tuesday morning when her father took her away. The major, during the same interval, had not been outside the door, and had spoken to nobody. And Mrs. Milroy, at the first attempt of her new attendant to inform her of the prevailing scandal in the town, had sealed the servant's lips by flying into one of her terrible passions the instant Miss Gwilt's name was mentioned. Something must have happened, of course, to take Major Milroy and his daughter so suddenly from home; but that something was certainly not Mr. Armadale's scandalous elopement, in broad daylight, with Miss Gwilt.

The afternoon passed, and the evening passed, and no other event happened but the purely private and personal event which had taken place at the cottage. Nothing occurred (for nothing in the nature of things *could* occur) to dissipate the delusion on which Miss Gwilt had counted – the delusion which all Thorpe Ambrose now shared with Mr. Bashwood, that she had gone privately to London with Allan in the character of Allan's future wife.

On the Wednesday morning, the postman, entering the street in which Mr. Bashwood lived, was encountered by Mr. Bashwood himself, so eager to know if there was a letter for him that he had come out without his hat. There *was* a let-

ter for him – the letter that he longed for from his vagabond son.

These were the terms in which Bashwood the younger answered his father's supplication for help – after having previously ruined his father's prospects for life:

“Shadyside Place. Tuesday, July 29th.

“MY DEAR DAD — We have some little practice in dealing with mysteries at this office; but the mystery of your letter beats me altogether. Are you speculating on the interesting hidden frailties of some charming woman? Or, after your experience of matrimony, are you actually going to give me a stepmother at this time of day? Whichever it is, upon my life your letter interests me.

“I am not joking, mind — though the temptation is not an easy one to resist. On the contrary, I have given you a quarter of an hour of my valuable time already. The place you date from sounded somehow familiar to me. I referred back to the memorandum book, and found that I was sent down to Thorpe Ambrose to make private inquiries not very long since. My employer was a lively old lady, who was too sly to give us her right name and address. As a matter of course, we set to work at once, and found out who she was. Her name is Mrs. Oldershaw; and, if you think of her for my stepmother, I strongly recommend you to think again before you make her Mrs. Bashwood.

“If it is not Mrs. Oldershaw, then all I can do, so far, is to tell you how you may find out the unknown lady's address. Come to town yourself as soon as you get the let-

ter you expect from the gentleman who has gone away with her (I hope he is not a handsome young man, for your sake) and call here. I will send somebody to help you in watching his hotel or lodgings; and if he communicates with the lady, or the lady with him, you may consider her address discovered from that moment. Once let me identify her, and know where she is, and you shall see all her charming little secrets as plainly as you see the paper on which your affectionate son is now writing to you.

“A word more about the terms. I am as willing as you are to be friends again; but, though I own you were out of pocket by me once, I can’t afford to be out of pocket by you. It must be understood that you are answerable for all the expenses of the inquiry. We may have to employ some of the women attached to this office, if your lady is too wide-awake or too nice-looking to be dealt with by a man. There will be cab hire, and postage-stamps — admissions to public amusements, if she is inclined that way — shillings for pew-openers, if she is serious, and takes our people into churches to hear popular preachers, and so on. My own professional services you shall have gratis; but I can’t lose by you as well. Only remember that, and you shall have your way. By-gones shall be by-gones, and we will forget the past.

*“Your affectionate son,
“JAMES BASHWOOD.”*

In the ecstasy of seeing help placed at last within his reach, the father put his son’s atrocious letter to his lips. “My good boy!” he murmured, tenderly — “my dear, good boy!”

He put the letter down, and fell into a new train of thought. The next question to face was the serious question of time. Mr. Pedgift had told him Miss Gwilt might be married in a fortnight. One day of the fourteen had passed already, and another was passing. He beat his hand impatiently on the table at his side, wondering how soon the want of money would force Allan to write to him from London. "To-morrow?" he asked himself. "Or next day?"

The morrow passed, and nothing happened. The next day came, and the letter arrived! It was on business, as he had anticipated; it asked for money, as he had anticipated; and there, at the end of it, in a postscript, was the address added, concluding with the words, "You may count on my staying here till further notice."

He gave one deep gasp of relief, and instantly busied himself – though there were nearly two hours to spare before the train started for London – in packing his bag. The last thing he put in was his blue satin cravat. "She likes bright colors," he said, "and she may see me in it yet!"

CHAPTER XIV MISS GWILT'S DIARY

"All Saints' Terrace, New Road, London, July 28th, Monday night. — I can hardly hold my head up, I am so tired. But in my situation, I dare not trust anything to memory. Before I go to bed, I must write my customary record of the events of the day.

"So far, the turn of luck in my favor (it was long enough before it took the turn!) seems likely to continue. I succeeded in forcing Armadale — the brute required nothing short of forcing! — to leave Thorpe Ambrose for London, alone in the same carriage with me, before all the people in the station. There was a full attendance of dealers in small scandal, all staring hard at us, and all evidently drawing their own conclusions. Either I knew nothing of Thorpe Ambrose — or the town gossip is busy enough by this time with Mr. Armadale and Miss Gwilt.

"I had some difficulty with him for the first half-hour after we left the station. The guard (delightful man! I felt so grateful to him!) had shut us up together, in expectation of half a crown at the end of the journey. Armadale was suspicious of me, and he showed it plainly. Little by little I tamed my wild

beast – partly by taking care to display no curiosity about his journey to town, and partly by interesting him on the subject of his friend Midwinter; dwelling especially on the opportunity that now offered itself for a reconciliation between them. I kept harping on this string till I set his tongue going, and made him amuse me as a gentleman is bound to do when he has the honor of escorting a lady on a long railway journey.

“What little mind he has was full, of course, of his own affairs and Miss Milroy’s. No words can express the clumsiness he showed in trying to talk about himself, without taking me into his confidence or mentioning Miss Milroy’s name.

“He was going to London, he gravely informed me, on a matter of indescribable interest to him. It was a secret for the present, but he hoped to tell it me soon; it had made a great difference already in the way in which he looked at the slanders spoken of him in Thorpe Ambrose; he was too happy to care what the scandal-mongers said of him now, and he should soon stop their mouths by appearing in a new character that would surprise them all. So he blundered on, with the firm persuasion that he was keeping me quite in the dark. It was hard not to laugh, when I thought of my anonymous letter on its way to the major; but I managed to control myself – though, I must own, with some difficulty. As the time wore on, I began to feel a terrible excitement; the position was, I think, a little too much for me. There I was, alone with him, talking in the most innocent, easy, familiar manner, and having it in my mind all the time to brush his life out of my way, when the moment comes, as I might brush a stain off my gown. It made my blood leap, and my cheeks flush. I caught myself laughing

once or twice much louder than I ought; and long before we got to London I thought it desirable to put my face in hiding by pulling down my veil.

“There was no difficulty, on reaching the terminus, in getting him to come in the cab with me to the hotel where Midwinter is staying. He was all eagerness to be reconciled with his dear friend – principally, I have no doubt, because he wants the dear friend to lend a helping hand to the elopement. The real difficulty lay, of course, with Midwinter. My sudden journey to London had allowed me no opportunity of writing to combat his superstitious conviction that he and his former friend are better apart. I thought it wise to leave Armadale in the cab at the door, and to go into the hotel by myself to pave the way for him.

“Fortunately, Midwinter had not gone out. His delight at seeing me some days sooner than he had hoped had something infectious in it, I suppose. Pooh! I may own the truth to my own diary! There was a moment when *I* forgot everything in the world but our two selves as completely as he did. I felt as if I was back in my teens – until I remembered the lout in the cab at the door. And then I was five-and-thirty again in an instant.

“His face altered when he heard who was below, and what it was I wanted of him; he looked not angry, but distressed. He yielded, however, before long, not to my reasons, for I gave him none, but to my entreaties. His old fondness for his friend might possibly have had some share in persuading him against his will; but my own opinion is that he acted entirely under the influence of his fondness for *Me*.

"I waited in the sitting-room while he went down to the door; so I knew nothing of what passed between them when they first saw each other again. But oh, the difference between the two men when the interval had passed, and they came upstairs together and joined me.

"They were both agitated, but in such different ways! The hateful Armadale, so loud and red and clumsy; the dear, lovable Midwinter, so pale and quiet, with such a gentleness in his voice when he spoke, and such tenderness in his eyes every time they turned my way. Armadale overlooked me as completely as if I had not been in the room. *He* referred to me over and over again in the conversation; *he* constantly looked at me to see what I thought, while I sat in my corner silently watching them; *he* wanted to go with me and see me safe to my lodgings, and spare me all trouble with the cabman and the luggage. When I thanked him and declined, Armadale looked unaffectedly relieved at the prospect of seeing my back turned, and of having his friend all to himself. I left him, with his awkward elbows half over the table, scrawling a letter (no doubt to Miss Milroy), and shouting to the waiter that he wanted a bed at the hotel. I had calculated on his staying, as a matter of course, where he found his friend staying. It was pleasant to find my anticipations realized, and to know that I have as good as got him now under my own eye.

"After promising to let Midwinter know where he could see me to-morrow, I went away in the cab to hunt for lodgings by myself.

"With some difficulty I have succeeded in getting an endurable sitting-room and bedroom in this house, where the

people are perfect strangers to me. Having paid a week's rent in advance (for I naturally preferred dispensing with a reference), I find myself with exactly three shillings and ninepence left in my purse. It is impossible to ask Midwinter for money, after he has already paid Mrs. Oldershaw's note of hand. I must borrow something to-morrow on my watch and chain at the pawnbroker's. Enough to keep me going for a fortnight is all, and more than all, that I want. In that time, or in less than that time, Midwinter will have married me."

"July 29th. – Two o'clock. – Early in the morning I sent a line to Midwinter, telling him that he would find me here at three this afternoon. That done, I devoted the morning to two errands of my own. One is hardly worth mentioning – it was only to raise money on my watch and chain. I got more than I expected; and more (even supposing I buy myself one or two little things in the way of cheap summer dress) than I am at all likely to spend before the wedding-day.

"The other errand was of a far more serious kind. It led me into an attorney's office.

"I was well aware last night (though I was too weary to put it down in my diary), that I could not possibly see Midwinter this morning – in the position he now occupies toward me – without at least *appearing* to take him into my confidence on the subject of myself and my circumstances. Excepting one necessary consideration which I must be careful not to overlook. There is not the least difficulty in my drawing on my invention, and telling him any story I please – for thus far I have told no story to anybody. Midwinter went away to London before it was possible to approach the subject. As to

the Milroys (having provided them with the customary reference), I could fortunately keep them at arms-length on all questions relating purely to myself. And lastly, when I affected my reconciliation with Armadale on the drive in front of the house, he was fool enough to be too generous to let me defend my character. When I had expressed my regret for having lost my temper and threatened Miss Milroy, and when I had accepted his assurance that my pupil had never done or meant to do me any injury, he was too magnanimous to hear a word on the subject of my private affairs. Thus I am quite unfettered by any former assertions of my own; and I may tell any story I please – with the one drawback hinted at already in the shape of a restraint. Whatever I may invent in the way of pure fiction, I must preserve the character in which I have appeared at Thorpe Ambrose; for, with the notoriety that is attached to *my other name*, I have no other choice but to marry Midwinter in my maiden name as ‘Miss Gwilt.’

“This was the consideration that took me into the lawyer’s office. I felt that I must inform myself, before I saw Midwinter later in the day, of any awkward consequences that may follow the marriage of a widow if she conceals her widow’s name.

“Knowing of no other professional person whom I could trust, I went boldly to the lawyer who had my interests in his charge, at that terrible past time in my life, which I have more reason than ever to shrink from thinking of now. He was astonished, and, as I could plainly detect, by no means pleased to see me. I had hardly opened my lips before he said he hoped I was not consulting him *again* (with a strong emphasis on the word) on my own account. I took the hint, and put the ques-

tion I had come to ask, in the interests of that accommodating personage on such occasions – an absent friend. The lawyer evidently saw through it at once; but he was sharp enough to turn my ‘friend’ to good account on his side. He said he would answer the question as a matter of courtesy toward a lady represented by myself; but he must make it a condition that this consultation of him by deputy should go no further.

“I accepted his terms; for I really respected the clever manner in which he contrived to keep me at arms-length without violating the laws of good-breeding. In two minutes I heard what he had to say, mastered it in my own mind, and went out.

“Short as it was, the consultation told me everything I wanted to know. I risk nothing by marrying Midwinter in my maiden instead of my widow’s name. The marriage is a good marriage in this way; that it can only be set aside if my husband finds out the imposture, and takes proceedings to invalidate our marriage in my lifetime. That is the lawyer’s answer in the lawyer’s own words. It relieves me at once – in this direction, at any rate – of all apprehension about the future. The only imposture my husband will ever discover – and then only if he happens to be on the spot – is the imposture that puts me in the place, and gives me the income of Armadale’s widow; and by that time I shall have invalidated my own marriage forever.

“Half-past two! Midwinter will be here in half an hour. I must go and ask my glass how I look. I must rouse my invention, and make up my little domestic romance. Am I feeling nervous about it? Something flutters in the place where my

heart used to be. At five-and-thirty, too! and after such a life as mine!"

Six o'clock. — He has just gone. The day for our marriage is a day determined on already.

"I have tried to rest and recover myself. I can't rest. I have come back to these leaves. There is much to be written in them since Midwinter has been here, that concerns me nearly.

"Let me begin with what I hate most to remember, and so be the sooner done with it — let me begin with the paltry string of falsehoods which I told him about my family troubles.

"What *can* be the secret of this man's hold on me? How is it that he alters me so that I hardly know myself again? I was like myself in the railway carriage yesterday with Armadale. It was surely frightful to be talking to the living man, through the whole of that long journey, with the knowledge in me all the while that I meant to be his widow — and yet I was only excited and fevered. Hour after hour I never shrunk once from speaking to Armadale; but the first trumpery falsehood I told Midwinter turned me cold when I saw that he believed it! I felt a dreadful hysterical choking in the throat when he entreated me not to reveal my troubles. And once — I am horrified when I think of it — once, when he said, 'If I *could* love you more dearly, I should love you more dearly now,' I was within a hair-breadth of turning traitor to myself. I was on the very point of crying out to him, 'Lies! all lies! I'm a fiend in human shape! Marry the wretchedest creature that prowls the streets, and you will marry a better woman than me!' Yes! the seeing his eyes moisten, the hearing his voice tremble, while I was deceiving him, shook me in that way. I have seen

handsomer men by hundreds, cleverer men by dozens. What can this man have roused in me? Is it Love? I thought I *bad* loved, never to love again. Does a woman not love when the man's hardness to her drives her to drown herself? A man drove *me* to that last despair in days gone by. Did all my misery at that time come from something which was not Love? Have I lived to be five-and-thirty, and am I only feeling now what Love really is? – now, when it is too late? Ridiculous! Besides, what is the use of asking? What do I know about it? What does any woman ever know? The more we think of it, the more we deceive ourselves. I wish I had been born an animal. My beauty might have been of some use to me then – it might have got me a good master.

“Here is a whole page of my diary filled; and nothing written yet that is of the slightest use to me! My miserable made-up story must be told over again here, while the incidents are fresh in my memory – or how am I to refer to it consistently on after-occasions when I may be obliged to speak of it again?

“There was nothing new in what I told him; it was the commonplace rubbish of the circulating libraries. A dead father; a lost fortune; vagabond brothers, whom I dread ever seeing again; a bedridden mother dependent on my exertions – No! I can't write it down! I hate myself, I despise myself, when I remember that *he* believed it because I said it – that *he* was distressed by it because it was my story! I will face the chances of contradicting myself – I will risk discovery and ruin – anything rather than dwell on that contemptible deception of him a moment longer.

"My lies came to an end at last. And then he talked to me of himself and of his prospects. Oh, what a relief it was to turn to that at the time! What a relief it is to come to it now!

"He has accepted the offer about which he wrote to me at Thorpe Ambrose; and he is now engaged as occasional foreign correspondent to the new newspaper. His first destination is Naples. I wish it had been some other place, for I have certain past associations with Naples which I am not at all anxious to renew. It has been arranged that he is to leave England not later than the eleventh of next month. By that time, therefore, I, who am to go with him, must go with him as his wife.

"There is not the slightest difficulty about the marriage. All this part of it is so easy that I begin to dread an accident.

"The proposal to keep the thing strictly private – which it might have embarrassed me to make – comes from Midwinter. Marrying me in his own name – the name that he has kept concealed from every living creature but myself and Mr. Brock – it is his interest that not a soul who knows him should be present at the ceremony; his friend Armadale least of all. He has been a week in London already. When another week has passed, he proposes to get the License, and to be married in the church belonging to the parish in which the hotel is situated. These are the only necessary formalities. I had but to say 'Yes' (he told me), and to feel no further anxiety about the future. I said 'Yes' with such a devouring anxiety about the future that I was afraid he would see it. What minutes the next few minutes were, when he whispered delicious words to me, while I hid my face on his breast!

"I recovered myself first, and led him back to the subject of Armadale, having my own reasons for wanting to know what they said to each other after I had left them yesterday.

"The manner in which Midwinter replied showed me that he was speaking under the restraint of respecting a confidence placed in him by his friend. Long before he had done, I detected what the confidence was. Armadale had been consulting him (exactly as I anticipated) on the subject of the elopement. Although he appears to have remonstrated against taking the girl secretly away from her home, Midwinter seems to have felt some delicacy about speaking strongly, remembering (widely different as the circumstances are) that he was contemplating a private marriage himself. I gathered, at any rate, that he had produced very little effect by what he had said; and that Armadale had already carried out his absurd intention of consulting the head-clerk in the office of his London lawyers.

"Having got as far as this, Midwinter put the question which I felt must come sooner or later. He asked if I objected to our engagement being mentioned, in the strictest secrecy, to his friend.

"I will answer,' he said, 'for Allan's respecting any confidence that I place in him. And I will undertake, when the time comes, so to use my influence over him as to prevent his being present at the marriage, and discovering (what he must never know) that my name is the same as his own. It would help me,' he went on, 'to speak more strongly about the object that has brought him to London, if I can requite the frankness with which he has spoken of his private affairs to me by the same frankness on my side.'

"I had no choice but to give the necessary permission, and I gave it. It is of the utmost importance to me to know what course Major Milroy takes with his daughter and Armadale after receiving my anonymous letter; and, unless I invite Armadale's confidence in some way, I am nearly certain to be kept in the dark. Let him once be trusted with the knowledge that I am to be Midwinter's wife, and what he tells his friend about his love affair he will tell me.

"When it had been understood between us that Armadale was to be taken into our confidence, we began to talk about ourselves again. How the time flew! What a sweet enchantment it was to forget everything in his arms! How he loves me! — ah, poor fellow, how he loves me!

"I have promised to meet him to-morrow morning in the Regent's Park. The less he is seen here the better. The people in this house are strangers to me, certainly; but it may be wise to consult appearances, as if I was still at Thorpe Ambrose, and not to produce the impression, even on their minds, that Midwinter is engaged to me. If any after-inquiries are made, when I have run my grand risk, the testimony of my London landlady might be testimony worth having.

"That wretched old Bashwood! Writing of Thorpe Ambrose reminds me of him. What will he say when the town gossip tells him that Armadale has taken me to London, in a carriage reserved for ourselves? It really is too absurd in a man of Bashwood's age and appearance to presume to be in love!..."

"July 30th. — News at last! Armadale has heard from Miss Milroy. My anonymous letter has produced its effect. The girl is removed from Thorpe Ambrose already; and the whole proj-

ect of the elopement is blown to the winds at once and forever. This was the substance of what Midwinter had to tell me when I met him in the Park. I affected to be excessively astonished, and to feel the necessary feminine longing to know all the particulars. 'Not that I expect to have my curiosity satisfied,' I added, 'for Mr. Armadale and I are little better than mere acquaintances, after all.'

"You are far more than a mere acquaintance in Allan's eyes," said Midwinter. "Having your permission to trust him, I have already told him how near and dear you are to me."

"Hearing this, I thought it desirable, before I put any questions about Miss Milroy, to attend to my own interests first, and to find out what effect the announcement of my coming marriage had produced on Armadale. It was possible that he might be still suspicious of me, and that the inquiries he made in London, at Mrs. Milroy's instigation, might be still hanging on his mind.

"Did Mr. Armadale seem surprised," I asked, "when you told him of our engagement, and when you said it was to be kept a secret from everybody?"

"He seemed greatly surprised," said Midwinter, "to hear that we were going to be married. All he said when I told him it must be kept a secret was that he supposed there were reasons on your side for making the marriage a private one."

"What did you say," I inquired, "when he made that remark?"

"I said the reasons were on my side," answered Midwinter. "And I thought it right to add – considering that Allan had allowed himself to be misled by the ignorant distrust of you

at Thorpe Ambrose – that you had confided to me the whole of your sad family story, and that you had amply justified your unwillingness; under any ordinary circumstances, to speak of your private affairs.”

(“I breathed freely again. He had said just what was wanted, just in the right way.”)

“‘Thank you,’ I said, ‘for putting me right in your friend’s estimation. Does he wish to see me?’ I added, by way of getting back to the other subject of Miss Milroy and the elopement.

“‘He is longing to see you,’ returned Midwinter. ‘He is in great distress, poor fellow – distress which I have done my best to soothe, but which, I believe, would yield far more readily to a woman’s sympathy than to mine.’

“‘Where is he now?’ I asked.

“‘He was at the hotel; and to the hotel I instantly proposed that we should go. It is a busy, crowded place; and (with my veil down) I have less fear of compromising myself there than at my quiet lodgings. Besides, it is vitally important to me to know what Armadale does next, under this total change of circumstances – for I must so control his proceedings as to get him away from England if I can. We took a cab: such was my eagerness to sympathize with the heart-broken lover, that we took a cab!’

“‘Anything so ridiculous as Armadale’s behavior under the double shock of discovering that his young lady has been taken away from him, and that I am to be married to Midwinter, I never before witnessed in all my experience. To say that he was like a child is a libel on all children who are not born idiots. He congratulated me on my coming marriage, and ex-

ecrated the unknown wretch who had written the anonymous letter, little thinking that he was speaking of one and the same person in one and the same breath. Now he submissively acknowledged that Major Milroy had his rights as a father, and now he reviled the major as having no feeling for anything but his mechanics and his clock. At one moment he started up, with the tears in his eyes, and declared that his 'darling Neelie' was an angel on earth. At another he sat down sulkily, and thought that a girl of her spirit might have run away on the spot and joined him in London. After a good half-hour of this absurd exhibition, I succeeded in quieting him; and then a few words of tender inquiry produced what I had expressly come to the hotel to see – Miss Milroy's letter.

"It was outrageously long, and rambling, and confused; in short, the letter of a fool. I had to wade through plenty of vulgar sentiment and lamentation, and to lose time and patience over maudlin outbursts of affection, and nauseous kisses inclosed in circles of ink. However, I contrived to extract the information I wanted at last; and here it is:

"The major, on receipt of my anonymous warning, appears to have sent at once for his daughter, and to have shown her the letter. 'You know what a hard life I lead with your mother; don't make it harder still, Neelie, by deceiving me.' That was all the poor old gentleman said. I always did like the major; and, though he was afraid to show it, I know he always liked me. His appeal to his daughter (if *her* account of it is to be believed) cut her to the heart. She burst out crying (let her alone for crying at the right moment!) and confessed everything.

"After giving her time to recover herself (if he had given her a good box on the ears it would have been more to the purpose!), the major seems to have put certain questions, and to have become convinced (as I was convinced myself) that his daughter's heart, or fancy, or whatever she calls it, was really and truly set on Armadale. The discovery evidently distressed as well as surprised him. He appears to have hesitated, and to have maintained his own unfavorable opinion of Miss Neelie's lover for some little time. But his daughter's tears and entreaties (so like the weakness of the dear old gentleman!) shook him at last. Though he firmly refused to allow of any marriage engagement at present, he consented to overlook the clandestine meetings in the park, and to put Armadale's fitness to become his son-in-law to the test, on certain conditions.

"These conditions are, that for the next six months to come all communication is to be broken off, both personally and by writing, between Armadale and Miss Milroy. That space of time is to be occupied by the young gentleman as he himself thinks best, and by the young lady in completing her education at school. If, when the six months have passed, they are both still of the same mind, and if Armadale's conduct in the interval has been such as to improve the major's opinion of him, he will be allowed to present himself in the character of Miss Milroy's suitor, and, in six months more, if all goes well, the marriage may take place.

"I declare I could kiss the dear old major, if I was only within reach of him! If I had been at his elbow, and had dictated the conditions myself, I could have asked for nothing better than this. Six months of total separation between Armadale

and Miss Milroy! In half that time – with all communication cut off between the two – it must go hard with me, indeed, if I don't find myself dressed in the necessary mourning, and publicly recognized as Armadale's widow.

“But I am forgetting the girl's letter. She gives her father's reasons for making his conditions, in her father's own words. The major seems to have spoken so sensibly and so feelingly that he left his daughter no decent alternative – and he leaves Armadale no decent alternative – but to submit. As well as I can remember, he seems to have expressed himself to Miss Neelie in these, or nearly in these terms:

“Don't think I am behaving cruelly to you, my dear: I am merely asking you to put Mr. Armadale to the proof. It is not only right, it is absolutely necessary, that you should hold no communication with him for some time to come; and I will show you why. In the first place, if you go to school, the necessary rules in such places – necessary for the sake of the other girls – would not permit you to see Mr. Armadale or to receive letters from him; and, if you are to become mistress of Thorpe Ambrose, to school you must go, for you would be ashamed, and I should be ashamed, if you occupied the position of a lady of station without having the accomplishments which all ladies of station are expected to possess. In the second place, I want to see whether Mr. Armadale will continue to think of you as he thinks now, without being encouraged in his attachment by seeing you, or reminded of it by hearing from you. If I am wrong in thinking him flighty and unreliable, and if your opinion of him is the right one, this is not putting the young man to an unfair test – true love survives much longer

separations than a separation of six months. And when that time is over, and well over; and when I have had him under my own eye for another six months, and have learned to think as highly of him as you do – even then, my dear, after all that terrible delay, you will still be a married woman before you are eighteen. Think of this, Neelie, and show that you love me and trust me, by accepting my proposal. I will hold no communication with Mr. Armadale myself. I will leave it to you to write and tell him what has been decided on. He may write back one letter, and one only, to acquaint you with his decision. After that, for the sake of your reputation, nothing more is to be said, and nothing more is to be done, and the matter is to be kept strictly private until the six months' interval is at an end.'

"To this effect the major spoke. His behavior to that little slut of a girl has produced a stronger impression on me than anything else in the letter. It has set me thinking (me, of all the people in the world!) of what they call 'a moral difficulty.' We are perpetually told that there can be no possible connection between virtue and vice. Can there not? Here is Major Milroy doing exactly what an excellent father, at once kind and prudent, affectionate and firm, would do under the circumstances; and by that very course of conduct he has now smoothed the way for *me*, as completely as if he had been the chosen accomplice of that abominable creature, Miss Gwilt. Only think of my reasoning in this way! But I am in such good spirits, I can do anything to-day. I have not looked so bright and so young as I look now for months past!

“To return to the letter, for the last time – it is so excessively dull and stupid that I really can’t help wandering away from it into reflections of my own, as a mere relief.

“After solemnly announcing that she meant to sacrifice herself to her beloved father’s wishes (the brazen assurance of her setting up for a martyr after what has happened exceeds anything I ever heard or read of!), Miss Neelie next mentioned that the major proposed taking her to the seaside for change of air, during the few days that were still to elapse before she went to school. Armadale was to send his answer by return of post, and to address her, under cover to her father, at Lowestoft. With this, and with a last outburst of tender protestation, crammed crookedly into a corner of the page, the letter ended. (N.B. – The major’s object in taking her to the seaside is plain enough. He still privately distrusts Armadale, and he is wisely determined to prevent any more clandestine meetings in the park before the girl is safely disposed of at school.)

“When I had done with the letter – I had requested permission to read parts of it which I particularly admired, for the second and third time! – we all consulted together in a friendly way about what Armadale was to do.

“He was fool enough, at the outset, to protest against submitting to Major Milroy’s conditions. He declared, with his odious red face looking the picture of brute health, that he should never survive a six months’ separation from his beloved Neelie. Midwinter (as may easily be imagined) seemed a little ashamed of him, and joined me in bringing him to his senses. We showed him, what would have been plain enough to anybody but a booby, that there was no honorable or even

decent alternative left but to follow the example of submission set by the young lady. 'Wait, and you will have her for your wife,' was what I said. 'Wait, and you will force the major to alter his unjust opinion of you,' was what Midwinter added. With two clever people hammering common sense into his head at that rate, it is needless to say that his head gave way, and he submitted.

"Having decided him to accept the major's conditions (I was careful to warn him, before he wrote to Miss Milroy, that my engagement to Midwinter was to be kept as strictly secret from her as from everybody else), the next question we had to settle related to his future proceedings. I was ready with the necessary arguments to stop him, if he had proposed returning to Thorpe Ambrose. But he proposed nothing of the sort. On the contrary, he declared, of his own accord, that nothing would induce him to go back. The place and the people were associated with everything that was hateful to him. There would be no Miss Milroy now to meet him in the park, and no Midwinter to keep him company in the solitary house. 'I'd rather break stones on the road,' was the sensible and cheerful way in which he put it, 'than go back to Thorpe Ambrose.'

"The first suggestion after this came from Midwinter. The sly old clergyman who gave Mrs. Oldershaw and me so much trouble has, it seems, been ill, but has been latterly reported better. 'Why not go to Somersetshire,' said Midwinter, 'and see your good friend, and my good friend, Mr. Brock?'

"Armadale caught at the proposal readily enough. He longed, in the first place, to see 'dear old Brock,' and he longed, in the second place, to see his yacht. After staying a few days

more in London with Midwinter, he would gladly go to Somersetshire. But what after that?

"Seeing my opportunity, I came to the rescue this time. 'You have got a yacht, Mr. Armadale,' I said; 'and you know that Midwinter is going to Italy. When you are tired of Somersetshire, why not make a voyage to the Mediterranean, and meet your friend, and your friend's wife, at Naples?'

"I made the allusion to 'his friend's wife' with the most becoming modesty and confusion. Armadale was enchanted. I had hit on the best of all ways of occupying the weary time. He started up, and wrung my hand in quite an ecstasy of gratitude. How I do hate people who can only express their feelings by hurting other people's hands!

"Midwinter was as pleased with my proposal as Armadale; but he saw difficulties in the way of carrying it out. He considered the yacht too small for a cruise to the Mediterranean, and he thought it desirable to hire a larger vessel. His friend thought otherwise. I left them arguing the question. It was quite enough for me to have made sure, in the first place, that Armadale will not return to Thorpe Ambrose; and to have decided him, in the second place, on going abroad. He may go how he likes. I should prefer the small yacht myself; for there seems to be a chance that the small yacht might do me the inestimable service of drowning him..."

"Five o'clock. — The excitement of feeling that I had got Armadale's future movements completely under my own control made me so restless, when I returned to my lodgings, that I was obliged to go out again, and do something. A new interest to

occupy me being what I wanted, I went to Pimlico to have it out with Mother Oldershaw.

"I walked; and made up my mind, on the way, that I would begin by quarreling with her.

"One of my notes of hand being paid already, and Midwinter being willing to pay the other two when they fall due, my present position with the old wretch is as independent a one as I could desire. I always get the better of her when it comes to a downright battle between us, and find her wonderfully civil and obliging the moment I have made her feel that mine is the strongest will of the two. In my present situation, she might be of use to me in various ways, if I could secure her assistance, without trusting her with secrets which I am now more than ever determined to keep to myself. That was my idea as I walked to Pimlico. Upsetting Mother Oldershaw's nerves, in the first place, and then twisting her round my little finger, in the second, promised me, as I thought, an interesting occupation for the rest of the afternoon.

"When I got to Pimlico, a surprise was in store for we. The house was shut up — not only on Mrs. Oldershaw's side, but on Doctor Downward's as well. A padlock was on the shop door; and a man was hanging about on the watch, who might have been an ordinary idler certainly, but who looked, to my mind, like a policeman in disguise.

"Knowing the risks the doctor runs in his particular form of practice, I suspected at once that something serious had happened, and that even cunning Mrs. Oldershaw was compromised this time. Without stopping, or making any inquiry, therefore, I called the first cab that passed me, and drove to the

post-office to which I had desired my letters to be forwarded if any came for me after I left my Thorpe Ambrose lodging.

“On inquiry a letter was produced for ‘Miss Gwilt.’ It was in Mother Oldershaw’s handwriting, and it told me (as I had supposed) that the doctor had got into a serious difficulty – that she was herself most unfortunately mixed up in the matter, and that they were both in hiding for the present. The letter ended with some sufficiently venomous sentences about my conduct at Thorpe Ambrose, and with a warning that I have not heard the last of Mrs. Oldershaw yet. It relieved me to find her writing in this way – for she would have been civil and cringing if she had had any suspicion of what I have really got in view. I burned the letter as soon as the candles came up. And there, for the present, is an end of the connection between Mother Jezebel and me. I must do all my own dirty work now; and I shall be all the safer, perhaps, for trusting nobody’s hands to do it but my own.”

“July 31st. – More useful information for me. I met Midwinter again in the Park (on the pretext that my reputation might suffer if he called too often at my lodgings), and heard the last news of Armadale since I left the hotel yesterday.

“After he had written to Miss Milroy, Midwinter took the opportunity of speaking to him about the necessary business arrangements during his absence from the great house. It was decided that the servants should be put on board wages, and that Mr. Bashwood should be left in charge. (Somehow, I don’t like this re-appearance of Mr. Bashwood in connection with my present interests, but there is no help for it.) The next question – the question of money – was settled at once by

Mr. Armadale himself. All his available ready-money (a large sum) is to be lodged by Mr. Bashwood in Coutts's Bank, and to be there deposited in Armadale's name. This, he said, would save him the worry of any further letter-writing to his steward, and would enable him to get what he wanted, when he went abroad, at a moment's notice. The plan thus proposed, being certainly the simplest and the safest, was adopted with Midwinter's full concurrence; and here the business discussion would have ended, if the everlasting Mr. Bashwood had not turned up again in the conversation, and prolonged it in an entirely new direction.

"On reflection, it seems to have struck Midwinter that the whole responsibility at Thorpe Ambrose ought not to rest on Mr. Bashwood's shoulders. Without in the least distrusting him, Midwinter felt, nevertheless, that he ought to have somebody set over him, to apply to in case of emergency. Armadale made no objection to this; he only asked, in his helpless way, who the person was to be?

"The answer was not an easy one to arrive at.

"Either of the two solicitors at Thorpe Ambrose might have been employed, but Armadale was on bad terms with both of them. Any reconciliation with such a bitter enemy as the elder lawyer, Mr. Darch, was out of the question; and reinstating Mr. Pedgift in his former position implied a tacit sanction on Armadale's part of the lawyer's abominable conduct toward *me*, which was scarcely consistent with the respect and regard that he felt for a lady who was soon to be his friend's wife. After some further discussion, Midwinter hit on a new suggestion which appeared to meet the difficulty. He proposed that Armadale

should write to a respectable solicitor at Norwich, stating his position in general terms, and requesting that gentleman to act as Mr. Bashwood's adviser and superintendent when occasion required. Norwich being within an easy railway ride of Thorpe Ambrose, Armadale saw no objection to the proposal, and promised to write to the Norwich lawyer. Fearing that he might make some mistake if he wrote without assistance, Midwinter had drawn him out a draft of the necessary letter, and Armadale was now engaged in copying the draft, and also in writing to Mr. Bashwood to lodge the money immediately in Coutts's Bank.

"These details are so dry and uninteresting in themselves that I hesitated at first about putting them down in my diary. But a little reflection has convinced me that they are too important to be passed over. Looked at from my point of view, they mean this — that Armadale's own act is now cutting him off from all communication with Thorpe Ambrose, even by letter. *He is as good as dead already to everybody he leaves behind him.* The causes which have led to such a result as that are causes which certainly claim the best place I can give them in these pages."

"August 1st. — Nothing to record, but that I have had a long, quiet, happy day with Midwinter. He hired a carriage, and we drove to Richmond, and dined there. After to-day's experience, it is impossible to deceive myself any longer. Come what may of it, I love him.

"I have fallen into low spirits since he left me. A persuasion has taken possession of my mind that the smooth and prosperous course of my affairs since I have been in London is too

smooth and prosperous to last. There is something oppressing me to-night, which is more than the oppression of the heavy London air."

"August 2d. — Three o'clock. — My presentiments, like other people's, have deceived me often enough; but I am almost afraid that my presentiment of last night was really prophetic, for once in a way.

"I went after breakfast to a milliner's in this neighborhood to order a few cheap summer things, and thence to Midwinter's hotel to arrange with him for another day in the country. I drove to the milliner's and to the hotel, and part of the way back. Then, feeling disgusted with the horrid close smell of the cab (somebody had been smoking in it, I suppose), I got out to walk the rest of the way. Before I had been two minutes on my feet, I discovered that I was being followed by a strange man.

"This may mean nothing but that an idle fellow has been struck by my figure, and my appearance generally. My face could have made no impression on him, for it was hidden as usual by my veil. Whether he followed me (in a cab, of course) from the milliner's, or from the hotel, I cannot say. Nor am I quite certain whether he did or did not track me to this door. I only know that I lost sight of him before I got back. There is no help for it but to wait till events enlighten me. If there is anything serious in what has happened, I shall soon discover it."

"Five o'clock. — *It is serious.* Ten minutes since, I was in my bedroom, which communicates with the sitting-room. I was just coming out, when I heard a strange voice on the landing outside — a woman's voice. The next instant the sitting-room door was suddenly opened; the woman's voice said, 'Are these

the apartments you have got to let?' and though the landlady, behind her, answered, 'No! higher up, ma'am,' the woman came on straight to my bedroom, as if she had not heard. I had just time to slam the door in her face before she saw me. The necessary explanations and apologies followed between the landlady and the stranger in the sitting-room, and then I was left alone again.

"I have no time to write more. It is plain that somebody has an interest in trying to identify me, and that, but for my own quickness, the strange woman would have accomplished this object by taking me by surprise. She and the man who followed me in the street are, I suspect, in league together; and there is probably somebody in the background whose interests they are serving. Is Mother Oldershaw attacking me in the dark? or who else can it be? No matter who it is; my present situation is too critical to be trifled with. I must get away from this house to-night, and leave no trace behind me by which I can be followed to another place."

"August 3d. — Gary Street, Tottenham Court Road. — I got away last night (after writing an excuse to Midwinter, in which 'my invalid mother' figured as the all-sufficient cause of my disappearance); and I have found refuge here. It has cost me some money; but my object is attained! Nobody can possibly have traced me from All Saints' Terrace to this address.

"After paying my landlady the necessary forfeit for leaving her without notice, I arranged with her son that he should take my boxes in a cab to the cloak-room at the nearest railway station, and send me the ticket in a letter, to wait my application for it at the post-office. While he went his way in one cab,

I went mine in another, with a few things for the night in my little hand-bag.

"I drove straight to the milliner's shop, which I had observed, when I was there yesterday, had a back entrance into a mews, for the apprentices to go in and out by. I went in at once, leaving the cab waiting for me at the door. 'A man is following me,' I said, 'and I want to get rid of him. Here is my cab fare; wait ten minutes before you give it to the driver, and let me out at once by the back way!' In a moment I was out in the mews; in another, I was in the next street; in a third, I hailed a passing omnibus, and was a free woman again.

"Having now cut off all communication between me and my last lodgings, the next precaution (in case Midwinter or Armadale are watched) is to cut off all communication, for some days to come at least, between me and the hotel. I have written to Midwinter – making my supposititious mother once more the excuse – to say that I am tied to my nursing duties, and that we must communicate by writing only for the present. Doubtful as I still am of who my hidden enemy really is, I can do no more to defend myself than I have done now."

"August 4th. – The two friends at the hotel had both written to me. Midwinter expresses his regret at our separation, in the tenderest terms. Armadale writes an entreaty for help under very awkward circumstances. A letter from Major Milroy has been forwarded to him from the great house, and he incloses it in his letter to me.

"Having left the seaside, and placed his daughter safely at the school originally chosen for her (in the neighborhood of Ely), the major appears to have returned to Thorpe Ambrose at

the close of last week; to have heard then, for the first time, the reports about Armadale and me; and to have written instantly to Armadale to tell him so.

"The letter is stern and short. Major Milroy dismisses the report as unworthy of credit, because it is impossible for him to believe in such an act of 'cold-blooded treachery,' as the scandal would imply, if the scandal were true. He simply writes to warn Armadale that, if he is not more careful in his actions for the future, he must resign all pretensions to Miss Milroy's hand. 'I neither expect, nor wish for, an answer to this' (the letter ends), 'for I desire to receive no mere protestations in words. By your conduct, and by your conduct alone, I shall judge you as time goes on. Let me also add that I positively forbid you to consider this letter as an excuse for violating the terms agreed on between us, by writing again to my daughter. You have no need to justify yourself in her eyes, for I fortunately removed her from Thorpe Ambrose before this abominable report had time to reach her; and I shall take good care, for her sake, that she is not agitated and unsettled by hearing it where she is now.'

"Armadale's petition to me, under these circumstances, entreats (as I am the innocent cause of the new attack on his character) that I will write to the major to absolve him of all indiscretion in the matter, and to say that he could not, in common politeness, do otherwise than accompany me to London.

"I forgive the impudence of his request, in consideration of the news that he sends me. It is certainly another circumstance in my favor that the scandal at Thorpe Ambrose is not to be allowed to reach Miss Milroy's ears. With her temper (if she

did hear it) she might do something desperate in the way of claiming her lover, and might compromise me seriously. As for my own course with Armadale, it is easy enough. I shall quiet him by promising to write to Major Milroy; and I shall take the liberty, in my own private interests, of not keeping my word.

“Nothing in the least suspicious has happened to-day. Whoever my enemies are, they have lost me, and between this and the time when I leave England they shall not find me again. I have been to the post-office, and have got the ticket for my luggage, inclosed to me in a letter from All Saints’ Terrace, as I directed. The luggage itself I shall still leave at the cloak-room, until I see the way before me more clearly than I see it now.”

“August 5th. – Two letters again from the hotel. Midwinter writes to remind me, in the prettiest possible manner, that he will have lived long enough in the parish by to-morrow to be able to get our marriage-license, and that he proposes applying for it in the usual way at Doctors’ Commons. Now, if I am ever to say it, is the time to say No. I can’t say No. There is the plain truth – and there is an end of it!

“Armadale’s letter is a letter of farewell. He thanks me for my kindness in consenting to write to the major, and bids me good-by, till we meet again at Naples. He has learned from his friend that there are private reasons which will oblige him to forbid himself the pleasure of being present at our marriage. Under these circumstances, there is nothing to keep him in London. He has made all his business arrangements; he goes to Somersetshire by to-night’s train; and, after staying some time with Mr. Brock, he will sail for the Mediterranean from

the Bristol Channel (in spite of Midwinter's objections) in his own yacht.

"The letter incloses a jeweler's box, with a ring in it – Armadale's present to me on my marriage. It is a ruby – but rather a small one, and set in the worst possible taste. He would have given Miss Milroy a ring worth ten times the money, if it had been *her* marriage present. There is no more hateful creature, in my opinion, than a miserly young man. I wonder whether his trumpery little yacht will drown him?

"I am so excited and fluttered, I hardly know what I am writing. Not that I shrink from what is coming – I only feel as if I was being hurried on faster than I quite like to go. At this rate, if nothing happens, Midwinter will have married me by the end of the week. And then –!"

"August 6th. – If anything could startle me now, I should feel startled by the news that has reached me to-day.

"On his return to the hotel this morning, after getting the marriage-license, Midwinter found a telegram waiting for him. It contained an urgent message from Armadale, announcing that Mr. Brock had had a relapse, and that all hope of his recovery was pronounced by the doctors to be at an end. By the dying man's own desire, Midwinter was summoned to take leave of him, and was entreated by Armadale not to lose a moment in starting for the rectory by the first train.

"The hurried letter which tells me this tells me also that, by the time I receive it, Midwinter will be on his way to the West. He promises to write at greater length, after he has seen Mr. Brock, by to-night's post.

"This news has an interest for me, which Midwinter little suspects. There is but one human creature, besides myself, who knows the secret of his birth and his name; and that one is the old man who now lies waiting for him at the point of death. What will they say to each other at the last moment? Will some chance word take them back to the time when I was in Mrs. Armadale's service at Madeira? Will they speak of Me?"

"August 7th. — The promised letter has just reached me. No parting words have been exchanged between them: it was all over before Midwinter reached Somersetshire. Armadale met him at the rectory gate with the news that Mr. Brock was dead.

"I try to struggle against it, but, coming after the strange complication of circumstances that has been closing round me for weeks past, there is something in this latest event of all that shakes my nerves. But one last chance of detection stood in my way when I opened my diary yesterday. When I open it to-day, that chance is removed by Mr. Brock's death. It means something; I wish I knew what.

"The funeral is to be on Saturday morning. Midwinter will attend it as well as Armadale. But he proposes returning to London first; and he writes word that he will call to-night, in the hope of seeing me, on his way from the station to the hotel. Even if there was any risk in it, I should see him, as things are now. But there is no risk if he comes here from the station instead of coming from the hotel."

"Five o'clock. — I was not mistaken in believing that my nerves were all unstrung. Trifles that would not have cost me

a second thought at other times weigh heavily on my mind now.

“Two hours since, in despair of knowing how to get through the day, I bethought myself of the milliner who is making my summer dress. I had intended to go and try it on yesterday; but it slipped out of my memory in the excitement of hearing about Mr. Brock. So I went this afternoon, eager to do anything that might help me to get rid of myself. I have returned, feeling more uneasy and more depressed than I felt when I went out; for I have come back fearing that I may yet have reason to repent not having left my unfinished dress on the milliner’s hands.

“Nothing happened to me, this time, in the street. It was only in the trying-on room that my suspicions were roused; and there it certainly did cross my mind that the attempt to discover me, which I defeated at All Saints’ Terrace, was not given up yet, and that some of the shop-women had been tampered with, if not the mistress herself.

“Can I give myself anything in the shape of a reason for this impression? Let me think a little.

“I certainly noticed two things which were out of the ordinary routine, under the circumstances. In the first place, there were twice as many women as were needed in the trying-on room. This looked suspicious; and yet I might have accounted for it in more ways than one. Is it not the slack time now? and don’t I know by experience that I am the sort of woman about whom other women are always spitefully curious? I thought again, in the second place, that one of the assistants persisted rather oddly in keeping me turned in a particular direction,

with my face toward the glazed and curtained door that led into the work-room. But, after all, she gave a reason when I asked for it. She said the light fell better on me that way; and, when I looked round, there was the window to prove her right. Still, these trifles produced such an effect on me, at the time, that I purposely found fault with the dress, so as to have an excuse for trying it on again, before I told them where I lived, and had it sent home. Pure fancy, I dare say. Pure fancy, perhaps, at the present moment. I don't care; I shall act on instinct (as they say), and give up the dress. In plainer words still, I won't go back."

"Midnight. — Midwinter came to see me as he promised. An hour has passed since we said good-night; and here I still sit, with my pen in my hand, thinking of him. No words of mine can describe what has passed between us. The end of it is all I can write in these pages; and the end of it is that he has shaken my resolution. For the first time since I saw the easy way to Armadale's life at Thorpe Ambrose, I feel as if the man whom I have doomed in my own thoughts had a chance of escaping me.

"Is it my love for Midwinter that has altered me? Or is it *his* love for *me* that has taken possession not only of all I wish to give him, but of all I wish to keep from him as well? I feel as if I had lost myself — lost myself, I mean, in *him* — all through the evening. He was in great agitation about what had happened in Somersetshire; and he made me feel as disheartened and as wretched about it as he did. Though he never confessed it in words, I know that Mr. Brock's death has startled him as an ill omen for our marriage — I know it, because I feel Mr. Brock's

death as an ill omen too. The superstition – *his* superstition – took so strong a hold on me, that when we grew calmer and he spoke of time future – when he told me that he must either break his engagement with his new employers or go abroad, as he is pledged to go, on Monday next – I actually shrank at the thought of our marriage following close on Mr. Brock's funeral; I actually said to him, in the impulse of the moment, 'Go, and begin your new life alone! go, and leave me here to wait for happier times.'

"He took me in his arms. He sighed, and kissed me with an angelic tenderness. He said – oh, so softly and so sadly! – I have no life now, apart from *you*.' As those words passed his lips, the thought seemed to rise in my mind like an echo, 'Why not live out all the days that are left to me, happy and harmless in a love like this!' I can't explain it – I can't realize it. That was the thought in me at the time; and that is the thought in me still. I see my own hand while I write the words – and I ask myself whether it is really the hand of Lydia Gwilt!

"Armadale –

"No! I will never write, I will never think of Armadale again.

"Yes! Let me write once more – let me think once more of him, because it quiets me to know that he is going away, and that the sea will have parted us before I am married. His old home is home to him no longer, now that the loss of his mother has been followed by the loss of his best and earliest friend. When the funeral is over, he has decided to sail the same day for the foreign seas. We may, or we may not, meet at Naples. Shall I be an altered woman if we do? I wonder; I wonder!"

"August 8th. — A line from Midwinter. He has gone back to Somersetshire to be in readiness for the funeral to-morrow; and he will return here (after bidding Armadale good-by) to-morrow evening.

"The last forms and ceremonies preliminary to our marriage have been complied with. I am to be his wife on Monday next. The hour must not be later than half-past ten — which will give us just time, when the service is over, to get from the church door to the railway, and to start on our journey to Naples the same day.

"To-day — Saturday — Sunday! I am not afraid of the time; the time will pass. I am not afraid of myself, if I can only keep all thoughts but one out of my mind. I love him! Day and night, till Monday comes, I will think of nothing but that. I love him!"

"Four o'clock. — Other thoughts are forced into my mind in spite of me. My suspicions of yesterday were no mere fancies; the milliner has been tampered with. My folly in going back to her house has led to my being traced here. I am absolutely certain that I never gave the woman my address; and yet my new gown was sent home to me at two o'clock to-day!

"A man brought it with the bill, and a civil message, to say that, as I had not called at the appointed time to try it on again, the dress had been finished and sent to me. He caught me in the passage; I had no choice but to pay the bill, and dismiss him. Any other proceeding, as events have now turned out, would have been pure folly. The messenger (not the man who followed me in the street, but another spy sent to look at me, beyond all doubt) would have declared he knew nothing

about it, if I had spoken to him. The milliner would tell me to my face, if I went to her, that I had given her my address. The one useful thing to do now is to set my wits to work in the interests of my own security, and to step out of the false position in which my own rashness has placed me – if I can.”

“Seven o’clock. – My spirits have risen again. I believe I am in a fair way of extricating myself already.

“I have just come back from a long round in a cab. First, to the cloak-room of the Great Western, to get the luggage which I sent there from All Saints’ Terrace. Next, to the cloak-room of the Southeastern, to leave my luggage (labeled in Midwinter’s name), to wait for me till the starting of the tidal train on Monday. Next, to the General Post-office, to post a letter to Midwinter at the rectory, which he will receive to-morrow morning. Lastly, back again to this house – from which I shall move no more till Monday comes.

“My letter to Midwinter will, I have little doubt, lead to his seconding (quite innocently) the precautions that I am taking for my own safety. The shortness of the time at our disposal on Monday will oblige him to pay his bill at the hotel and to remove his luggage before the marriage ceremony takes place. All I ask him to do beyond this is to take the luggage himself to the Southeastern (so as to make any inquiries useless which may address themselves to the servants at the hotel) – and, that done, to meet me at the church door, instead of calling for me here. The rest concerns nobody but myself. When Sunday night or Monday morning comes, it will be hard, indeed – freed as I am now from all incumbrances – if I can’t give the people who are watching me the slip for the second time.

"It seems needless enough to have written to Midwinter to-day, when he is coming back to me to-morrow night. But it was impossible to ask, what I have been obliged to ask of him, without making my false family circumstances once more the excuse; and having this to do – I must own the truth – I wrote to him because, after what I suffered on the last occasion, I can never again deceive him to his face."

"August 9th. – Two o'clock. – I rose early this morning, more depressed in spirits than usual. The re-beginning of one's life, at the re-beginning of every day, has already been something weary and hopeless to me for years past. I dreamed, too, all through the night – not of Midwinter and of my married life, as I had hoped to dream – but of the wretched conspiracy to discover me, by which I have been driven from one place to another, like a hunted animal. Nothing in the shape of a new revelation enlightened me in my sleep. All I could guess dreaming was what I had guessed waking, that Mother Oldershaw is the enemy who is attacking me in the dark.

"My restless night has, however, produced one satisfactory result. It has led to my winning the good graces of the servant here, and securing all the assistance she can give me when the time comes for making my escape.

"The girl noticed this morning that I looked pale and anxious. I took her into my confidence, to the extent of telling her that I was privately engaged to be married, and that I had enemies who were trying to part me from my sweetheart. This instantly roused her sympathy, and a present of a ten-shilling piece for her kind services to me did the rest. In the intervals of her housework she has been with me nearly the whole morn-

ing; and I found out, among other things, that *her* sweetheart is a private soldier in the Guards, and that she expects to see him to-morrow. I have got money enough left, little as it is, to turn the head of any Private in the British army; and, if the person appointed to watch me to-morrow is a man, I think it just possible that he may find his attention disagreeably diverted from Miss Gwilt in the course of the evening.

“When Midwinter came here last from the railway, he came at half-past eight. How am I to get through the weary, weary hours between this and the evening? I think I shall darken my bedroom, and drink the blessing of oblivion from my bottle of Drops.”

“Eleven o’clock. — We have parted for the last time before the day comes that makes us man and wife.

“He has left me, as he left me before, with an absorbing subject of interest to think of in his absence. I noticed a change in him the moment he entered the room. When he told me of the funeral, and of his parting with Armadale on board the yacht, though he spoke with feelings deeply moved, he spoke with a mastery over himself which is new to me in my experience of him. It was the same when our talk turned next on our own hopes and prospects. He was plainly disappointed when he found that my family embarrassments would prevent our meeting to-morrow, and plainly uneasy at the prospect of leaving me to find my way by myself on Monday to the church. But there was a certain hopefulness and composure of manner underlying it all, which produced so strong an impression on me that I was obliged to notice it.

"You know what odd fancies take possession of me sometimes,' I said. 'Shall I tell you the fancy that has taken possession of me now? I can't help thinking that something has happened since we last saw each other which you have not told me yet.

"Something *has* happened,' he answered. 'And it is something which you ought to know.'

"With those words he took out his pocket-book, and produced two written papers from it. One he looked at and put back. The other he placed on the table.

"Before I tell you what this is, and how it came into my possession,' he said, 'I must own something that I have concealed from you. It is no more serious confession than the confession of my own weakness.'

"He then acknowledged to me that the renewal of his friendship with Armadale had been clouded, through the whole period of their intercourse in London, by his own superstitious misgivings. He had obeyed the summons which called him to the rector's bedside, with the firm intention of confiding his previsions of coming trouble to Mr. Brock; and he had been doubly confirmed in his superstition when he found that Death had entered the house before him, and had parted them, in this world, forever. More than this, he had traveled back to be present at the funeral, with a secret sense of relief at the prospect of being parted from Armadale, and with a secret resolution to make the after-meeting agreed on between us three at Naples a meeting that should never take place. With that purpose in his heart, he had gone up alone to the room prepared for him on his arrival at the rectory, and had opened

a letter which he found waiting for him on the table. The letter had only that day been discovered – dropped and lost – under the bed on which Mr. Brock had died. It was in the rector's handwriting throughout; and the person to whom it was addressed was Midwinter himself.

“Having told me this, nearly in the words in which I have written it, he gave me the written paper that lay on the table between us.

“Read it,’ he said; ‘and you will not need to be told that my mind is at peace again, and that I took Allan’s hand at parting with a heart that was worthier of Allan’s love.’

“I read the letter. There was no superstition to be conquered in *my* mind; there were no old feelings of gratitude toward Armadale to be roused in *my* heart; and yet, the effect which the letter had had on Midwinter was, I firmly believe, more than matched by the effect that the letter now produced on me.

“It was vain to ask him to leave it, and to let me read it again (as I wished) when I was left by myself. He is determined to keep it side by side with that other paper which I had seen him take out of his pocket-book, and which contains the written narrative of Armadale’s Dream. All I could do was to ask his leave to copy it; and this he granted readily. I wrote the copy in his presence; and I now place it here in my diary, to mark a day which is one of the memorable days in my life.

“Boscombe Rectory, August 2d.

“MY DEAR MIDWINTER – For the first time since the beginning of my illness, I found strength enough yesterday to look over my letters. One among them is a letter from Al-

lan, which has been lying unopened on my table for ten days past. He writes to me in great distress, to say that there has been dissension between you, and that you have left him. If you still remember what passed between us, when you first opened your heart to me in the Isle of Man, you will be at no loss to understand how I have thought over this miserable news, through the night that has now passed, and you will not be surprised to hear that I have roused myself this morning to make the effort of writing to you.

“I want no explanation of the circumstances which have parted you from your friend. If my estimate of your character is not founded on an entire delusion, the one influence which can have led to your estrangement from Allan is the influence of that evil spirit of Superstition which I have once already cast out of your heart — which I will once again conquer, please God, if I have strength enough to make my pen speak my mind to you in this letter.

“It is no part of my design to combat the belief which I know you to hold, that mortal creatures may be the objects of supernatural intervention in their pilgrimage through this world. Speaking as a reasonable man, I own that I cannot prove you to be wrong. Speaking as a believer in the Bible, I am bound to go further, and to admit that you possess a higher than any human warrant for the faith that is in you. The one object which I have it at heart to attain is to induce you to free yourself from the paralyzing fatalism of the heathen and the savage, and to look at the mysteries that perplex, and the portents that daunt you, from the Christian’s point of view. If I can succeed in this, I shall

clear your mind of the ghastly doubts that now oppress it, and I shall reunite you to your friend, never to be parted from him again.

"I have no means of seeing and questioning you. I can only send this letter to Allan to be forwarded, if he knows, or can discover, your present address. Placed in this position toward you, I am bound to assume all that can be assumed in your favor. I will take it for granted that something has happened to you or to Allan which to your mind has not only confirmed the fatalist conviction in which your father died, but has added a new and terrible meaning to the warning which he sent you in his death-bed letter.

"On this common ground I meet you. On this common ground I appeal to your higher nature and your better sense.

"Preserve your present conviction that the events which have happened (be they what they may) are not to be reconciled with ordinary mortal coincidences and ordinary mortal laws; and view your own position by the best and clearest light that your superstition can throw on it. What are you? You are a helpless instrument in the hands of Fate. You are doomed, beyond all human capacity of resistance, to bring misery and destruction blindfold on a man to whom you have harmlessly and gratefully united yourself in the bonds of a brother's love. All that is morally firmest in your will and morally purest in your aspirations avails nothing against the hereditary impulsion of you toward evil, caused by a crime which your father committed before you were born. In what does that belief end? It ends

in the darkness in which you are now lost; in the self-contradictions in which you are now bewildered; in the stubborn despair by which a man profanes his own soul, and lowers himself to the level of the brutes that perish.

“Look up, my poor suffering brother — look up, my hardly tried, my well-loved friend, higher than this! Meet the doubts that now assail you from the blessed vantage-ground of Christian courage and Christian hope; and your heart will turn again to Allan, and your mind will be at peace. Happen what may, God is all-merciful, God is all-wise: natural or supernatural, it happens through Him. The mystery of Evil that perplexes our feeble minds, the sorrow and the suffering that torture us in this little life, leave the one great truth unshaken that the destiny of man is in the hands of his Creator, and that God’s blessed Son died to make us worthier of it. Nothing that is done in unquestioning submission to the wisdom of the Almighty is done wrong. No evil exists out of which, in obedience to his laws, Good may not come. Be true to what Christ tells you is true. Encourage in yourself, be the circumstances what they may, all that is loving, all that is grateful, all that is patient, all that is forgiving, toward your fellow-men. And humbly and trustfully leave the rest to the God who made you, and to the Saviour who loved you better than his own life.

“This is the faith in which I have lived, by the Divine help and mercy, from my youth upward. I ask you earnestly, I ask you confidently, to make it your faith, too. It is the mainspring of all the good I have ever done, of all the

happiness I have ever known; it lightens my darkness, it sustains my hope; it comforts and quiets me, lying here, to live or die, I know not which. Let it sustain, comfort, and enlighten you. It will help you in your sorest need, as it has helped me in mine. It will show you another purpose in the events which brought you and Allan together than the purpose which your guilty father foresaw. Strange things, I do not deny it, have happened to you already. Stranger things still may happen before long, which I may not live to see. Remember, if that time comes, that I died firmly disbelieving in your influence over Allan being other than an influence for good. The great sacrifice of the Atonement — I say it reverently — has its mortal reflections, even in this world. If danger ever threatens Allan, you, whose father took his father's life — YOU, and no other, may be the man whom the providence of God has appointed to save him.

"Come to me if I live. Go back to the friend who loves you, whether I live or die.

*"Yours affectionately to the last,
"DECIMUS BROCK."*

"You, and no other, may be the man whom the providence of God has appointed to save him!"

"Those are the words which have shaken me to the soul. Those are the words which make me feel as if the dead man had left his grave, and had put his hand on the place in my heart where my terrible secret lies hidden from every living creature but myself. One part of the letter has come true al-

ready. The danger that it foresees threatens Armadale at this moment – and threatens him from Me!

“If the favoring circumstances which have driven me thus far drive me on to the end, and if that old man’s last earthly conviction is prophetic of the truth, Armadale will escape me, do what I may. And Midwinter will be the victim who is sacrificed to save his life.

“It is horrible! it is impossible! it shall never be! At the thinking of it only, my hand trembles and my heart sinks. I bless the trembling that unnerves me! I bless the sinking that turns me faint! I bless those words in the letter which have revived the relenting thoughts that first came to me two days since! Is it hard, now that events are taking me, smoothly and safely, nearer and nearer to the End – is it hard to conquer the temptation to go on? No! If there is only a chance of harm coming to Midwinter, the dread of that chance is enough to decide me – enough to strengthen me to conquer the temptation, for his sake. I have never loved him yet, never, never, never as I love him now!”

“Sunday, August 10th. – The eve of my wedding-day! I close and lock this book, never to write in it, never to open it again.

“I have won the great victory; I have trampled my own wickedness under foot. I am innocent; I am happy again. My love! my angel! when to-morrow gives me to you, I will not have a thought in my heart which is not *your* thought, as well as mine!”

CHAPTER XV THE WEDDING-DAY

The time was nine o'clock in the morning. The place was a private room in one of the old-fashioned inns which still remain on the Borough side of the Thames. The date was Monday, the 11th of August. And the person was Mr. Bashwood, who had traveled to London on a summons from his son, and had taken up his abode at the inn on the previous day.

He had never yet looked so pitiably old and helpless as he looked now. The fever and chill of alternating hope and despair had dried, and withered, and wasted him. The angles of his figure had sharpened. The outline of his face had shrunk. His dress pointed the melancholy change in him with a merciless and shocking emphasis. Never, even in his youth, had he worn such clothes as he wore now. With the desperate resolution to leave no chance untried of producing an impression on Miss Gwilt, he had cast aside his dreary black garments; he had even mustered the courage to wear his blue satin cravat. His coat was a riding-coat of light gray. He had ordered it, with a vindictive subtlety of purpose, to be made on the pattern of a coat that he had seen Allan wear. His waistcoat was white; his trousers were of the gayest summer pattern, in the largest

check. His wig was oiled and scented, and brushed round, on either side, to hide the wrinkles on his temples. He was an object to laugh at; he was an object to weep over. His enemies, if a creature so wretched could have had enemies, would have forgiven him, on seeing him in his new dress. His friends – had any of his friends been left – would have been less distressed if they had looked at him in his coffin than if they had looked at him as he was now. Incessantly restless, he paced the room from end to end. Now he looked at his watch; now he looked out of the window; now he looked at the well-furnished breakfast-table – always with the same wistful, uneasy inquiry in his eyes. The waiter coming in, with the urn of boiling water, was addressed for the fiftieth time in the one form of words which the miserable creature seemed to be capable of uttering that morning: “My son is coming to breakfast. My son is very particular. I want everything of the best – hot things and cold things – and tea and coffee – and all the rest of it, waiter; all the rest of it.” For the fiftieth time, he now reiterated those anxious words. For the fiftieth time, the impenetrable waiter had just returned his one pacifying answer, “All right, sir; you may leave it to me” – when the sound of leisurely footsteps was heard on the stairs; the door opened; and the long-expected son sauntered indolently into the room, with a neat little black leather bag in his hand.

“Well done, old gentleman!” said Bashwood the younger, surveying his father’s dress with a smile of sardonic encouragement. “You’re ready to be married to Miss Gwilt at a moment’s notice!”

The father took the son's hand, and tried to echo the son's laugh.

"You have such good spirits, Jemmy," he said, using the name in its familiar form, as he had been accustomed to use it in happier days. "You always had good spirits, my dear, from a child. Come and sit down; I've ordered you a nice breakfast. Everything of the best! everything of the best! What a relief it is to see you! Oh, dear, dear, what a relief it is to see you." He stopped and sat down at the table, his face flushed with the effort to control the impatience that was devouring him. "Tell me about her!" he burst out, giving up the effort with a sudden self-abandonment. "I shall die, Jemmy, if I wait for it any longer. Tell me! tell me! tell me!"

"One thing at a time," said Bashwood the younger, perfectly unmoved by his father's impatience. "We'll try the breakfast first, and come to the lady afterward! Gently does it, old gentleman – gently does it!"

He put his leather bag on a chair, and sat down opposite to his father, composed, and smiling, and humming a little tune.

No ordinary observation, applying the ordinary rules of analysis, would have detected the character of Bashwood the younger in his face. His youthful look, aided by his light hair and his plump beardless cheeks, his easy manner and his ever-ready smile, his eyes which met unshrinkingly the eyes of every one whom he addressed, all combined to make the impression of him a favorable impression in the general mind. No eye for reading character, but such an eye as belongs to one person, perhaps, in ten thousand, could have penetrated the smoothly deceptive surface of this man, and have seen him

for what he really was – the vile creature whom the viler need of Society has fashioned for its own use. There he sat – the Confidential Spy of modern times, whose business is steadily enlarging, whose Private Inquiry Offices are steadily on the increase. There he sat – the necessary Detective attendant on the progress of our national civilization; a man who was, in this instance at least, the legitimate and intelligible product of the vocation that employed him; a man professionally ready on the merest suspicion (if the merest suspicion paid him) to get under our beds, and to look through gimlet-holes in our doors; a man who would have been useless to his employers if he could have felt a touch of human sympathy in his father's presence; and who would have deservedly forfeited his situation if, under any circumstances whatever, he had been personally accessible to a sense of pity or a sense of shame.

"Gently does it, old gentleman," he repeated, lifting the covers from the dishes, and looking under them one after the other all round the table. "Gently does it!"

"Don't be angry with me, Jemmy," pleaded his father. "Try, if you can, to think how anxious I must be. I got your letter so long ago as yesterday morning. I have had to travel all the way from Thorpe Ambrose – I have had to get through the dreadful long evening and the dreadful long night – with your letter telling me that you had found out who she is, and telling me nothing more. Suspense is very hard to bear, Jemmy, when you come to my age. What was it prevented you, my dear, from coming to me when I got here yesterday evening?"

"A little dinner at Richmond," said Bashwood the younger. "Give me some tea."

Mr. Bashwood tried to comply with the request; but the hand with which he lifted the teapot trembled so unmanageably that the tea missed the cup and streamed out on the cloth. "I'm very sorry; I can't help trembling when I'm anxious," said the old man, as his son took the tea-pot out of his hand. "I'm afraid you bear me malice, Jemmy, for what happened when I was last in town. I own I was obstinate and unreasonable about going back to Thorpe Ambrose. I'm more sensible now. You were quite right in taking it all on yourself, as soon as I showed you the veiled lady when we saw her come out of the hotel; and you were quite right to send me back the same day to my business in the steward's office at the Great House." He watched the effect of these concessions on his son, and ventured doubtfully on another entreaty. "If you won't tell me anything else just yet," he said, faintly, "will you tell me how you found her out. Do, Jemmy, do!"

Bashwood the younger looked up from his plate. "I'll tell you that," he said. "The reckoning up of Miss Gwilt has cost more money and taken more time than I expected; and the sooner we come to a settlement about it, the sooner we shall get to what you want to know."

Without a word of expostulation, the father laid his dingy old pocket-book and his purse on the table before the son. Bashwood the younger looked into the purse; observed, with a contemptuous elevation of the eyebrows, that it held no more than a sovereign and some silver; and returned it intact. The pocket-book, on being opened next, proved to contain four five-pound notes. Bashwood the younger transferred three of the notes to his own keeping; and handed the pocket-book

back to his father, with a bow expressive of mock gratitude and sarcastic respect.

"A thousand thanks," he said. "Some of it is for the people at our office, and the balance is for myself. One of the few stupid things, my dear sir, that I have done in the course of my life was to write you word, when you first consulted me, that you might have my services gratis. As you see, I hasten to repair the error. An hour or two at odd times I was ready enough to give you. But this business has taken days, and has got in the way of other jobs. I told you I couldn't be out of pocket by you – I put it in my letter, as plain as words could say it."

"Yes, yes, Jemmy. I don't complain, my dear, I don't complain. Never mind the money – tell me how you found her out."

"Besides," pursued Bashwood, the younger, proceeding impenetrably with his justification of himself, "I have given you the benefit of my experience; I've done it cheap. It would have cost double the money if another man had taken this in hand. Another man would have kept a watch on Mr. Armadale as well as Miss Gwilt. I have saved you that expense. You are certain that Mr. Armadale is bent on marrying her. Very good. In that case, while we have our eye on *her*, we have, for all useful purposes, got our eye on *him*. Know where the lady is, and you know that the gentleman can't be far off."

"Quite true, Jemmy. But how was it Miss Gwilt came to give you so much trouble?"

"She's a devilish clever woman," said Bashwood the younger; "that's how it was. She gave us the slip at a milliner's shop. We made it all right with the milliner, and speculated on the

chance of her coming back to try on a gown she had ordered. The cleverest women lose the use of their wits in nine cases out of ten where there's a new dress in the case, and even Miss Gwilt was rash enough to go back. That was all we wanted. One of the women from our office helped to try on her new gown, and put her in the right position to be seen by one of our men behind the door. He instantly suspected who she was, on the strength of what he had been told of her; for she's a famous woman in her way. Of course, we didn't trust to that. We traced her to her new address; and we got a man from Scotland Yard, who was certain to know her, if our own man's idea was the right one. The man from Scotland Yard turned milliner's lad for the occasion, and took her gown home. He saw her in the passage, and identified her in an instant. You're in luck, I can tell you. Miss Gwilt's a public character. If we had had a less notorious woman to deal with, she might have cost us weeks of inquiry, and you might have had to pay hundreds of pounds. A day did it in Miss Gwilt's case; and another day put the whole story of her life, in black and white, into my hand. There it is at the present moment, old gentleman, in my black bag."

Bashwood the father made straight for the bag with eager eyes and outstretched hand. Bashwood the son took a little key out of his waistcoat pocket, winked, shook his head, and put the key back again.

"I haven't done breakfast yet," he said. "Gently does it, my dear sir – gently does it."

"I can't wait!" cried the old man, struggling vainly to preserve his self-control. "It's past nine! It's a fortnight to-day since she went to London with Mr. Armadale! She may be married to

him in a fortnight! She may be married to him this morning! I can't wait! I can't wait!"

"There's no knowing what you can do till you try," rejoined Bashwood the younger. "Try, and you'll find you can wait. What has become of your curiosity?" he went on, feeding the fire ingeniously with a stick at a time. "Why don't you ask me what I mean by calling Miss Gwilt a public character? Why don't you wonder how I came to lay my hand on the story of her life, in black and white? If you'll sit down again, I'll tell you. If you won't, I shall confine myself to my breakfast."

Mr. Bashwood sighed heavily, and went back to his chair.

"I wish you were not so fond of your joke, Jemmy," he said. "I wish, my dear, you were not quite so fond of your joke."

"Joke?" repeated his son. "It would be serious enough in some people's eyes, I can tell you. Miss Gwilt has been tried for her life; and the papers in that black bag are the lawyer's instructions for the Defense. Do you call that a joke?"

The father started to his feet, and looked straight across the table at the son with a smile of exultation that was terrible to see.

"She's been tried for her life!" he burst out, with a deep gasp of satisfaction. "She's been tried for her life!" He broke into a low, prolonged laugh, and snapped his fingers exultingly. "Aha-ha-ha! Something to frighten Mr. Armadale in *that!*"

Scoundrel as he was, the son was daunted by the explosion of pent-up passion which burst on him in those words.

"Don't excite yourself," he said, with a sullen suppression of the mocking manner in which he had spoken thus far.

Mr. Bashwood sat down again, and passed his handkerchief over his forehead. "No," he said, nodding and smiling at his son. "No, no – no excitement, as you say – I can wait now, Jemmy; I can wait now."

He waited with immovable patience. At intervals, he nodded, and smiled, and whispered to himself, "Something to frighten Mr. Armadale in *that!*" But he made no further attempt, by word, look, or action, to hurry his son.

Bashwood the younger finished his breakfast slowly, out of pure bravado; lit a cigar with the utmost deliberation; looked at his father, and, seeing him still as immovably patient as ever, opened the black bag at last, and spread the papers on the table.

"How will you have it?" he asked. "Long or short? I have got her whole life here. The counsel who defended her at the trial was instructed to hammer hard at the sympathies of the jury: he went head over ears into the miseries of her past career, and shocked everybody in court in the most workmanlike manner. Shall I take the same line? Do you want to know all about her, from the time when she was in short frocks and frilled trousers? or do you prefer getting on at once to her first appearance as a prisoner in the dock?"

"I want to know all about her," said his father, eagerly. "The worst, and the best – the worst particularly. Don't spare my feelings, Jemmy – whatever you do, don't spare my feelings! Can't I look at the papers myself?"

"No, you can't. They would be all Greek and Hebrew to you. Thank your stars that you have got a sharp son, who can take the pith out of these papers, and give it a smack of the

right flavor in serving it up. There are not ten men in England who could tell you this woman's story as I can tell it. It's a gift, old gentleman, of the sort that is given to very few people – and it lodges here.”

He tapped his forehead smartly, and turned to the first page of the manuscript before him, with an unconcealed triumph at the prospect of exhibiting his own cleverness, which was the first expression of a genuine feeling of any sort that had escaped him yet.

“Miss Gwilt's story begins,” said Bashwood the younger, “in the market-place at Thorpe Ambrose. One day, something like a quarter of a century ago, a traveling quack doctor, who dealt in perfumery as well as medicines, came to the town with his cart, and exhibited, as a living example of the excellence of his washes and hair-oils and so on, a pretty little girl, with a beautiful complexion and wonderful hair. His name was Oldershaw. He had a wife, who helped him in the perfumery part of his business, and who carried it on by herself after his death. She has risen in the world of late years; and she is identical with that sly old lady who employed me professionally a short time since. As for the pretty little girl, you know who she was as well as I do. While the quack was haranguing the mob and showing them the child's hair, a young lady, driving through the marketplace, stopped her carriage to hear what it was all about, saw the little girl, and took a violent fancy to her on the spot. The young lady was the daughter of Mr. Blanchard, of Thorpe Ambrose. She went home, and interested her father in the fate of the innocent little victim of the quack doctor. The same evening, the Oldershaws were sent for to the great

house and were questioned. They declared themselves to be her uncle and aunt – a lie, of course! – and they were quite willing to let her attend the village school, while they stayed at Thorpe Ambrose, when the proposal was made to them. The new arrangement was carried out the next day. And the day after that, the Oldershaws had disappeared, and had left the little girl on the squire's hands! She evidently hadn't answered as they expected in the capacity of an advertisement, and that was the way they took of providing for her for life. There is the first act of the play for you! Clear enough, so far, isn't it?"

"Clear enough, Jemmy, to clever people. But I'm old and slow. I don't understand one thing. Whose child was she?"

"A very sensible question. Sorry to inform you that nobody can answer it – Miss Gwilt herself included. These Instructions that I'm referring to are founded, of course, on her own statements, sifted by her attorney. All she could remember, on being questioned, was that she was beaten and half starved, somewhere in the country, by a woman who took in children at nurse. The woman had a card with her, stating that her name was Lydia Gwilt, and got a yearly allowance for taking care of her (paid through a lawyer) till she was eight years old. At that time, the allowance stopped; the lawyer had no explanation to offer; nobody came to look after her; nobody wrote. The Oldershaws saw her, and thought she might answer to exhibit; and the woman parted with her for a trifle to the Oldershaws; and the Oldershaws parted with her for good and all to the Blanchards. That's the story of her birth, parentage, and education! She may be the daughter of a duke, or the daughter of a costermonger. The circumstances may be highly roman-

tic, or utterly commonplace. Fancy anything you like – there's nothing to stop you. When you've had your fancy out, say the word, and I'll turn over the leaves and go on."

"Please to go on, Jemmy – please to go on."

"The next glimpse of Miss Gwilt," resumed Bashwood the younger, turning over the papers, "is a glimpse at a family mystery. The deserted child was in luck's way at last. She had taken the fancy of an amiable young lady with a rich father, and she was petted and made much of at the great house, in the character of Miss Blanchard's last new plaything. Not long afterward Mr. Blanchard and his daughter went abroad, and took the girl with them in the capacity of Miss Blanchard's little maid. When they came back, the daughter had married, and become a widow, in the interval; and the pretty little maid, instead of returning with them to Thorpe Ambrose, turns up suddenly, all alone, as a pupil at a school in France. There she was, at a first-rate establishment, with her maintenance and education secured until she married and settled in life, on this understanding – that she never returned to England. Those were all the particulars she could be prevailed on to give the lawyer who drew up these instructions. She declined to say what had happened abroad; she declined even, after all the years that had passed, to mention her mistress's married name. It's quite clear, of course, that she was in possession of some family secret; and that the Blanchards paid for her schooling on the Continent to keep her out of the way. And it's equally plain that she would never have kept her secret as she did if she had not seen her way to trading on it for her own advantage at some future time. A clever woman, as I've told you already! A

devilish clever woman, who hasn't been knocked about in the world, and seen the ups and downs of life abroad and at home, for nothing."

"Yes, yes, Jemmy; quite true. How long did she stop, please, at the school in France?"

Bashwood the younger referred to the papers. "She stopped at the French school," he replied, "till she was seventeen. At that time something happened at the school which I find mildly described in these papers as 'something unpleasant.' The plain fact was that the music-master attached to the establishment fell in love with Miss Gwilt. He was a respectable middle-aged man, with a wife and family; and, finding the circumstances entirely hopeless, he took a pistol, and, rashly assuming that he had brains in his head, tried to blow them out. The doctor saved his life, but not his reason; he ended, where he had better have begun, in an asylum. Miss Gwilt's beauty having been at the bottom of the scandal, it was, of course, impossible – though she was proved to have been otherwise quite blameless in the matter – for her to remain at the school after what had happened. Her 'friends' (the Blanchards) were communicated with. And her friends transferred her to another school; at Brussels, this time – What are you sighing about? What's wrong now?"

"I can't help feeling a little for the poor music-master, Jemmy. Go on."

"According to her own account of it, dad, Miss Gwilt seems to have felt for him too. She took a serious turn; and was 'converted' (as they call it) by the lady who had charge of her in the interval before she went to Brussels. The priest at the Bel-

gium school appears to have been a man of some discretion, and to have seen that the girl's sensibilities were getting into a dangerously excited state. Before he could quiet her down, he fell ill, and was succeeded by another priest, who was a fanatic. You will understand the sort of interest he took in the girl, and the way in which he worked on her feelings, when I tell you that she announced it as her decision, after having been nearly two years at the school, to end her days in a convent! You may well stare! Miss Gwilt, in the character of a Nun, is the sort of female phenomenon you don't often set eyes on."

"Did she go into the convent?" asked Mr. Bashwood. "Did they let her go in, so friendless and so young, with nobody to advise her for the best?"

"The Blanchards were consulted, as a matter of form," pursued Bashwood the younger. "*They* had no objection to her shutting herself up in a convent, as you may well imagine. The pleasantest letter they ever had from her, I'll answer for it, was the letter in which she solemnly took leave of them in this world forever. The people at the convent were as careful as usual not to commit themselves. Their rules wouldn't allow her to take the veil till she had tried the life for a year first, and then, if she had any doubt, for another year after that. She tried the life for the first year, accordingly, and doubted. She tried it for the second year, and was wise enough, by that time, to give it up without further hesitation. Her position was rather an awkward one when she found herself at liberty again. The sisters at the convent had lost their interest in her; the mistress at the school declined to take her back as teacher, on the ground that she was too nice-looking for the place; the priest consid-

ered her to be possessed by the devil. There was nothing for it but to write to the Blanchards again, and ask them to start her in life as a teacher of music on her own account. She wrote to her former mistress accordingly. Her former mistress had evidently doubted the genuineness of the girl's resolution to be a nun, and had seized the opportunity offered by her entry into the convent to cut off all further communication between her ex-waiting-maid and herself. Miss Gwilt's letter was returned by the post-office. She caused inquiries to be made; and found that Mr. Blanchard was dead, and that his daughter had left the great house for some place of retirement unknown. The next thing she did, upon this, was to write to the heir in possession of the estate. The letter was answered by his solicitors, who were instructed to put the law in force at the first attempt she made to extort money from any member of the family at Thorpe Ambrose. The last chance was to get at the address of her mistress's place of retirement. The family bankers, to whom she wrote, wrote back to say that they were instructed not to give the lady's address to any one applying for it, without being previously empowered to do so by the lady herself. That last letter settled the question — Miss Gwilt could do nothing more. With money at her command, she might have gone to England and made the Blanchards think twice before they carried things with too high a hand. Not having a half-penny at command, she was helpless. Without money and without friends, you may wonder how she supported herself while the correspondence was going on. She supported herself by playing the piano-forte at a low concert-room in Brussels. The men laid siege to her, of course, in all directions; but they found her

insensible as adamant. One of these rejected gentlemen was a Russian; and he was the means of making her acquainted with a countrywoman of his, whose name is unpronounceable by English lips. Let us give her her title, and call her the baroness. The two women liked each other at their first introduction; and a new scene opened in Miss Gwilt's life. She became reader and companion to the baroness. Everything was right, everything was smooth on the surface. Everything was rotten and everything was wrong under it."

"In what way, Jemmy? Please to wait a little, and tell me in what way."

"In this way. The baroness was fond of traveling, and she had a select set of friends about her who were quite of her way of thinking. They went from one city on the Continent to another, and were such charming people that they picked up acquaintances everywhere. The acquaintances were invited to the baroness's receptions, and card-tables were invariably a part of the baroness's furniture. Do you see it now? or must I tell you, in the strictest confidence, that cards were not considered sinful on these festive occasions, and that the luck, at the end of the evening, turned out to be almost invariably on the side of the baroness and her friends? Swindlers, all of them; and there isn't a doubt on my mind, whatever there may be on yours, that Miss Gwilt's manners and appearance made her a valuable member of the society in the capacity of a decoy. Her own statement is that she was innocent of all knowledge of what really went on; that she was quite ignorant of card-playing; that she hadn't such a thing as a respectable friend to turn to in the world; and that she honestly liked the baroness, for

the simple reason that the baroness was a hearty good friend to her from first to last. Believe that or not, as you please. For five years she traveled about all over the Continent with these card-sharpers in high life, and she might have been among them at this moment, for anything I know to the contrary, if the baroness had not caught a Tartar at Naples, in the shape of a rich traveling Englishman, named Waldron. Aha! that name startles you, does it? You've read the Trial of the famous Mrs. Waldron, like the rest of the world? And you know who Miss Gwilt is now, without my telling you?"

He paused, and looked at his father in sudden perplexity. Far from being overwhelmed by the discovery which had just burst on him, Mr. Bashwood, after the first natural movement of surprise, faced his son with a self-possession which was nothing short of extraordinary under the circumstances. There was a new brightness in his eyes, and a new color in his face. If it had been possible to conceive such a thing of a man in his position, he seemed to be absolutely encouraged instead of depressed by what he had just heard. "Go on, Jemmy," he said, quietly; "I am one of the few people who didn't read the trial; I only heard of it."

Still wondering inwardly, Bashwood the younger recovered himself, and went on.

"You always were, and you always will be, behind the age," he said. "When we come to the trial, I can tell you as much about it as you need know. In the meantime, we must go back to the baroness and Mr. Waldron. For a certain number of nights the Englishman let the card-sharpers have it all their own way; in other words, he paid for the privilege of making

himself agreeable to Miss Gwilt. When he thought he had produced the necessary impression on her, he exposed the whole confederacy without mercy. The police interfered; the baroness found herself in prison; and Miss Gwilt was put between the two alternatives of accepting Mr. Waldron's protection or being thrown on the world again. She was amazingly virtuous, or amazingly clever, which you please. To Mr. Waldron's astonishment, she told him that she could face the prospect of being thrown on the world; and that he must address her honorably or leave her forever. The end of it was what the end always is, where the man is infatuated and the woman is determined. To the disgust of his family and friends, Mr. Waldron made a virtue of necessity, and married her."

"How old was he?" asked Bashwood the elder, eagerly.

Bashwood the younger burst out laughing. "He was about old enough, daddy, to be your son, and rich enough to have burst that precious pocket-book of yours with thousand-pound notes! Don't hang your head. It wasn't a happy marriage, though he *was* so young and so rich. They lived abroad, and got on well enough at first. He made a new will, of course, as soon as he was married, and provided handsomely for his wife, under the tender pressure of the honey-moon. But women wear out, like other things, with time; and one fine morning Mr. Waldron woke up with a doubt in his mind whether he had not acted like a fool. He was an ill-tempered man; he was discontented with himself; and of course he made his wife feel it. Having begun by quarreling with her, he got on to suspecting her, and became savagely jealous of every male creature who entered the house. They had no incumbrances in the shape of

children, and they moved from one place to another, just as his jealousy inclined him, till they moved back to England at last, after having been married close on four years. He had a lonely old house of his own among the Yorkshire moors, and there he shut his wife and himself up from every living creature, except his servants and his dogs. Only one result could come, of course, of treating a high-spirited young woman in that way. It may be her fate, or it may be chance; but, whenever a woman is desperate, there is sure to be a man handy to take advantage of it. The man in this case was rather a 'dark horse,' as they say on the turf. He was a certain Captain Manuel, a native of Cuba, and (according to his own account) an ex-officer in the Spanish navy. He had met Mr. Waldron's beautiful wife on the journey back to England; had contrived to speak to her in spite of her husband's jealousy; and had followed her to her place of imprisonment in Mr. Waldron's house on the moors. The captain is described as a clever, determined fellow – of the daring piratical sort – with the dash of mystery about him that women like – “

“She's not the same as other women!” interposed Mr. Bashwood, suddenly interrupting his son. “Did she –?” His voice failed him, and he stopped without bringing the question to an end.

“Did she like the captain?” suggested Bashwood the younger, with another laugh. “According to her own account of it, she adored him. At the same time her conduct (as represented by herself) was perfectly innocent. Considering how carefully her husband watched her, the statement (incredible as it appears) is probably true. For six weeks or so they confined

themselves to corresponding privately, the Cuban captain (who spoke and wrote English perfectly) having contrived to make a go-between of one of the female servants in the Yorkshire house. How it might have ended we needn't trouble ourselves to inquire — Mr. Waldron himself brought matters to a crisis. Whether he got wind of the clandestine correspondence or not, doesn't appear. But this is certain, that he came home from a ride one day in a fiercer temper than usual; that his wife showed him a sample of that high spirit of hers which he had never yet been able to break; and that it ended in his striking her across the face with his riding-whip. Ungentlemanly conduct, I am afraid we must admit; but, to all outward appearance, the riding-whip produced the most astonishing results. From that moment the lady submitted as she had never submitted before. For a fortnight afterward he did what he liked, and she never thwarted him; he said what he liked, and she never uttered a word of protest. Some men might have suspected this sudden reformation of hiding something dangerous under the surface. Whether Mr. Waldron looked at it in that light, I can't tell you. All that is known is that, before the mark of the whip was off his wife's face, he fell ill, and that in two days afterward he was a dead man. What do you say to that?"

"I say he deserved it!" answered Mr. Bashwood, striking his hand excitedly on the table, as his son paused and looked at him.

"The doctor who attended the dying man was not of your way of thinking," remarked Bashwood the younger, dryly. "He called in two other medical men, and they all three refused to certify the death. The usual legal investigation followed. The

evidence of the doctors and the evidence of the servants pointed irresistibly in one and the same direction; and Mrs. Waldron was committed for trial, on the charge of murdering her husband by poison. A solicitor in first-rate criminal practice was sent for from London to get up the prisoner's defense, and these 'Instructions' took their form and shape accordingly. – What's the matter? What do you want now?"

Suddenly rising from his chair, Mr. Bashwood stretched across the table, and tried to take the papers from his son. "I want to look at them," he burst out, eagerly. "I want to see what they say about the captain from Cuba. He was at the bottom of it, Jemmy – I'll swear he was at the bottom of it!"

"Nobody doubted that who was in the secret of the case at the time," rejoined his son. "But nobody could prove it. Sit down again, dad, and compose yourself. There's nothing here about Captain Manuel but the lawyer's private suspicions of him, for the counsel to act on or not, at the counsel's discretion. From first to last she persisted in screening the captain. At the outset of the business she volunteered two statements to the lawyer – both of which he suspected to be false. In the first place she declared that she was innocent of the crime. He wasn't surprised, of course, so far; his clients were, as a general rule, in the habit of deceiving him in that way. In the second place, while admitting her private correspondence with the Cuban captain, she declared that the letters on both sides related solely to a proposed elopement, to which her husband's barbarous treatment had induced her to consent. The lawyer naturally asked to see the letters. 'He has burned all my letters, and I have burned all his,' was the only answer he got. It

was quite possible that Captain Manuel might have burned *her* letters when he heard there was a coroner's inquest in the house. But it was in her solicitor's experience (as it is in my experience too) that, when a woman is fond of a man, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, risk or no risk, she keeps his letters. Having his suspicions roused in this way, the lawyer privately made some inquiries about the foreign captain, and found that he was as short of money as a foreign captain could be. At the same time, he put some questions to his client about her expectations from her deceased husband. She answered, in high indignation, that a will had been found among her husband's papers, privately executed only a few days before his death, and leaving her no more, out of all his immense fortune, than five thousand pounds. 'Was there an older will, then,' says the lawyer, 'which the new will revoked?' Yes, there was; a will that he had given into her own possession — a will made when they were first married. 'Leaving his widow well provided for?' Leaving her just ten times as much as the second will left her. 'Had she ever mentioned that first will, now revoked, to Captain Manuel?' She saw the trap set for her, and said, 'No, never!' without an instant's hesitation. That reply confirmed the lawyer's suspicions. He tried to frighten her by declaring that her life might pay the forfeit of her deceiving him in this matter. With the usual obstinacy of women, she remained just as immovable as ever. The captain, on his side, behaved in the most exemplary manner. He confessed to planning the elopement; he declared that he had burned all the lady's letters as they reached him, out of regard for her reputation; he remained in the neighborhood; and he volunteered

to attend before the magistrates. Nothing was discovered that could legally connect him with the crime, or that could put him into court on the day of the trial, in any other capacity than the capacity of a witness. I don't believe myself that there's any moral doubt (as they call it) that Manuel knew of the will which left her mistress of fifty thousand pounds; and that he was ready and willing, in virtue of that circumstance, to marry her on Mr. Waldron's death. If anybody tempted her to effect her own release from her husband by making herself a widow, the captain must have been the man. And unless she contrived, guarded and watched as she was, to get the poison for herself, the poison must have come to her in one of the captain's letters."

"I don't believe she used it, if it did come to her!" exclaimed Mr. Bashwood. "I believe it was the captain himself who poisoned her husband!"

Bashwood the younger, without noticing the interruption, folded up the Instructions for the Defense, which had now served their purpose, put them back in his bag, and produced a printed pamphlet in their place.

"Here is one of the published Reports of the Trial," he said, "which you can read at your leisure, if you like. We needn't waste time now by going into details. I have told you already how cleverly her counsel paved his way for treating the charge of murder as the crowning calamity of the many that had already fallen on an innocent woman. The two legal points relied on for the defense (after this preliminary flourish) were: First, that there was no evidence to connect her with the possession of poison; and, secondly, that the medical witnesses, while pos-

itively declaring that her husband had died by poison, differed in their conclusions as to the particular drug that had killed him. Both good points, and both well worked; but the evidence on the other side bore down everything before it. The prisoner was proved to have had no less than three excellent reasons for killing her husband. He had treated her with almost unexampled barbarity; he had left her in a will (unrevoked so far as she knew) mistress of a fortune on his death; and she was, by her own confession, contemplating an elopement with another man. Having set forth these motives, the prosecution next showed by evidence, which was never once shaken on any single point, that the one person in the house who could by any human possibility have administered the poison was the prisoner at the bar. What could the judge and jury do, with such evidence before them as this? The verdict was Guilty, as a matter of course; and the judge declared that he agreed with it. The female part of the audience was in hysterics; and the male part was not much better. The judge sobbed, and the bar shuddered. She was sentenced to death in such a scene as had never been previously witnessed in an English court of justice. And she is alive and hearty at the present moment; free to do any mischief she pleases, and to poison, at her own entire convenience, any man, woman, or child that happens to stand in her way. A most interesting woman! Keep on good terms with her, my dear sir, whatever you do, for the Law has said to her in the plainest possible English, "My charming friend, I have no terrors for *you*!"

"How was she pardoned?" asked Mr. Bashwood, breathlessly. "They told me at the time, but I have forgotten. Was it the

Home Secretary? If it was, I respect the Home Secretary! I say the Home Secretary was deserving of his place."

"Quite right, old gentleman!" rejoined Bashwood the younger. "The Home Secretary was the obedient humble servant of an enlightened Free Press, and he *was* deserving of his place. Is it possible you don't know how she cheated the gallows? If you don't, I must tell you. On the evening of the trial, two or three of the young buccaneers of literature went down to two or three newspaper offices, and wrote two or three heart-rending leading articles on the subject of the proceedings in court. The next morning the public caught light like tinder; and the prisoner was tried over again, before an amateur court of justice, in the columns of the newspapers. All the people who had no personal experience whatever on the subject seized their pens, and rushed (by kind permission of the editor) into print. Doctors who had *not* attended the sick man, and who had *not* been present at the examination of the body, declared by dozens that he had died a natural death. Barristers without business, who had *not* heard the evidence, attacked the jury who had heard it, and judged the judge, who had sat on the bench before some of them were born. The general public followed the lead of the barristers and the doctors, and the young buccaneers who had set the thing going. Here was the law that they all paid to protect them actually doing its duty in dreadful earnest! Shocking! shocking! The British Public rose to protest as one man against the working of its own machinery; and the Home Secretary, in a state of distraction, went to the judge. The judge held firm. He had said it was the right verdict at the time, and he said so still. 'But suppose,' says

the Home Secretary, 'that the prosecution had tried some other way of proving her guilty at the trial than the way they did try, what would you and the jury have done then?' Of course it was quite impossible for the judge to say. This comforted the Home Secretary, to begin with. And, when he got the judge's consent, after that, to having the conflict of medical evidence submitted to one great doctor; and when the one great doctor took the merciful view, after expressly stating, in the first instance, that he knew nothing practically of the merits of the case, the Home Secretary was perfectly satisfied. The prisoner's death-warrant went into the waste-paper basket; the verdict of the law was reversed by general acclamation; and the verdict of the newspapers carried the day. But the best of it is to come. You know what happened when the people found themselves with the pet object of their sympathy suddenly cast loose on their hands? A general impression prevailed directly that she was not quite innocent enough, after all, to be let out of prison then and there! Punish her a little – that was the state of the popular feeling – punish her a little, Mr. Home Secretary, on general moral grounds. A small course of gentle legal medicine, if you love us, and then we shall feel perfectly easy on the subject to the end of our days."

"Don't joke about it!" cried his father. "Don't, don't, don't, Jemmy! Did they try her again? They couldn't! They durs'n't! Nobody can be tried twice over for the same offense."

"Pooh! pooh! she could be tried a second time for a second offense," retorted Bashwood the younger – "and tried she was. Luckily for the pacification of the public mind, she had rushed headlong into redressing her own grievances (as

women will), when she discovered that her husband had cut her down from a legacy of fifty thousand pounds to a legacy of five thousand by a stroke of his pen. The day before the inquest a locked drawer in Mr. Waldron's dressing-room table, which contained some valuable jewelry, was discovered to have been opened and emptied; and when the prisoner was committed by the magistrates, the precious stones were found torn out of their settings and sewed up in her stays. The lady considered it a case of justifiable self-compensation. The law declared it to be a robbery committed on the executors of the dead man. The lighter offense – which had been passed over when such a charge as murder was brought against her – was just the thing to revive, to save appearances in the eyes of the public. They had stopped the course of justice, in the case of the prisoner, at one trial; and now all they wanted was to set the course of justice going again, in the case of the prisoner, at another! She was arraigned for the robbery, after having been pardoned for the murder. And, what is more, if her beauty and her misfortunes hadn't made a strong impression on her lawyer, she would not only have had to stand another trial, but would have had even the five thousand pounds, to which she was entitled by the second will, taken away from her, as a felon, by the Crown."

"I respect her lawyer! I admire her lawyer!" exclaimed Mr. Bashwood. "I should like to take his hand, and tell him so."

"He wouldn't thank you, if you did," remarked Bashwood the younger. "He is under a comfortable impression that nobody knows how he saved Mrs. Waldron's legacy for her but himself."

"I beg your pardon, Jemmy," interposed his father. "But don't call her Mrs. Waldron. Speak of her, please, by her name when she was innocent, and young, and a girl at school. Would you mind, for my sake, calling her Miss Gwilt?"

"Not I! It makes no difference to me what name I give her. Bother your sentiment! let's go on with the facts. This is what the lawyer did before the second trial came off. He told her she would be found guilty *again*, to a dead certainty. 'And this time,' he said, 'the public will let the law take its course. Have you got an old friend whom you can trust?' She hadn't such a thing as an old friend in the world. 'Very well, then,' says the lawyer, you must trust me. Sign this paper; and you will have executed a fictitious sale of all your property to myself. When the right time comes, I shall first carefully settle with your husband's executors; and I shall then reconvey the money to you, securing it properly (in case you ever marry again) in your own possession. The Crown, in other transactions of this kind, frequently waives its right of disputing the validity of the sale; and, if the Crown is no harder on you than on other people, when you come out of prison you will have your five thousand pounds to begin the world with again.' Neat of the lawyer, when she was going to be tried for robbing the executors, to put her up to a way of robbing the Crown, wasn't it? Ha! ha! what a world it is!"

The last effort of the son's sarcasm passed unheeded by the father. "In prison!" he said to himself. "Oh me, after all that misery, in prison again!"

"Yes," said Bashwood the younger, rising and stretching himself, "that's how it ended. The verdict was Guilty; and the

sentence was imprisonment for two years. She served her time; and came out, as well as I can reckon it, about three years since. If you want to know what she did when she recovered her liberty, and how she went on afterward, I may be able to tell you something about it – say, on another occasion, when you have got an extra note or two in your pocket-book. For the present, all you need know, you do know. There isn't the shadow of a doubt that this fascinating lady has the double slur on her of having been found guilty of murder, and of having served her term of imprisonment for theft. There's your money's worth for your money – with the whole of my wonderful knack at stating a case clearly, thrown in for nothing. If you have any gratitude in you, you ought to do something handsome, one of these days, for your son. But for me, I'll tell you what you would have done, old gentleman. If you could have had your own way, you would have married Miss Gwilt."

Mr. Bashwood rose to his feet, and looked his son steadily in the face.

"If I could have my own way," he said, "I would marry her now."

Bashwood the younger started back a step. "After all I have told you?" he asked, in the blankest astonishment.

"After all you have told me."

"With the chance of being poisoned, the first time you happened to offend her?"

"With the chance of being poisoned," answered Mr. Bashwood, "in four-and-twenty hours."

The Spy of the Private Inquiry Office dropped back into his chair, cowed by his father's words and his father's looks.

"Mad!" he said to himself. "Stark mad, by jingo!"

Mr. Bashwood looked at his watch, and hurriedly took his hat from a side-table.

"I should like to hear the rest of it," he said. "I should like to hear every word you have to tell me about her, to the very last. But the time, the dreadful, galloping time, is getting on. For all I know, they may be on their way to be married at this very moment."

"What are you going to do?" asked Bashwood the younger, getting between his father and the door.

"I am going to the hotel," said the old man, trying to pass him. "I am going to see Mr. Armadale."

"What for?"

"To tell him everything you have told me." He paused after making that reply. The terrible smile of triumph which had once already appeared on his face overspread it again. "Mr. Armadale is young; Mr. Armadale has all his life before him," he whispered, cunningly, with his trembling fingers clutching his son's arm. "What doesn't frighten *me* will frighten *him*!"

"Wait a minute," said Bashwood the younger. "Are you as certain as ever that Mr. Armadale is the man?"

"What man?"

"The man who is going to marry her."

"Yes! yes! yes! Let me go, Jemmy – let me go."

The spy set his back against the door, and considered for a moment. Mr. Armadale was rich – Mr. Armadale (if *he* was not stark mad too) might be made to put the right money-value on information that saved him from the disgrace of marrying Miss Gwilt. "It may be a hundred pounds in my pocket

if I work it myself," thought Bashwood the younger. "And it won't be a half-penny if I leave it to my father." He took up his hat and his leather bag. "Can you carry it all in your own addled old head, daddy?" he asked, with his easiest impudence of manner. "Not you! I'll go with you and help you. What do you think of that?"

The father threw his arms in an ecstasy round the son's neck. "I can't help it, Jemmy," he said, in broken tones. "You are so good to me. Take the other note, my dear – I'll manage without it – take the other note."

The son threw open the door with a flourish; and magnanimously turned his back on the father's offered pocket-book. "Hang it, old gentleman, I'm not quite so mercenary as *that!*" he said, with an appearance of the deepest feeling. "Put up your pocket-book, and let's be off." "If I took my respected parent's last five-pound note," he thought to himself, as he led the way downstairs, "how do I know he mightn't cry halves when he sees the color of Mr. Armadale's money?" "Come along, dad!" he resumed. "We'll take a cab and catch the happy bridegroom before he starts for the church!"

They hailed a cab in the street, and started for the hotel which had been the residence of Midwinter and Allan during their stay in London. The instant the door of the vehicle had closed, Mr. Bashwood returned to the subject of Miss Gwilt.

"Tell me the rest," he said, taking his son's hand, and patting it tenderly. "Let's go on talking about her all the way to the hotel. Help me through the time, Jemmy – help me through the time."

Bashwood the younger was in high spirits at the prospect of seeing the color of Mr. Armadale's money. He trifled with his father's anxiety to the very last.

"Let's see if you remember what I've told you already," he began. "There's a character in the story that's dropped out of it without being accounted for. Come! can you tell me who it is?"

He had reckoned on finding his father unable to answer the question. But Mr. Bashwood's memory, for anything that related to Miss Gwilt, was as clear and ready as his son's. "The foreign scoundrel who tempted her, and let her screen him at the risk of her own life," he said, without an instant's hesitation. "Don't speak of him, Jemmy – don't speak of him again!"

"I *must* speak of him," retorted the other. "You want to know what became of Miss Gwilt when she got out of prison, don't you? Very good – I'm in a position to tell you. She became Mrs. Manuel. It's no use staring at me, old gentleman. I know it officially. At the latter part of last year, a foreign lady came to our place, with evidence to prove that she had been lawfully married to Captain Manuel, at a former period of his career, when he had visited England for the first time. She had only lately discovered that he had been in this country again; and she had reason to believe that he had married another woman in Scotland. Our people were employed to make the necessary inquiries. Comparison of dates showed that the Scotch marriage – if it was a marriage at all, and not a sham – had taken place just about the time when Miss Gwilt was a free woman again. And a little further investigation showed us that the second Mrs. Manuel was no other than the heroine of the

famous criminal trial – whom we didn't know then, but whom we do know now, to be identical with your fascinating friend, Miss Gwilt."

Mr. Bashwood's head sank on his breast. He clasped his trembling hands fast in each other, and waited in silence to hear the rest.

"Cheer up!" pursued his son. "She was no more the captain's wife than you are; and what is more, the captain himself is out of your way now. One foggy day in December last he gave us the slip; and was off to the continent, nobody knew where. He had spent the whole of the second Mrs. Manuel's five thousand pounds, in the time that had elapsed (between two and three years) since she had come out of prison; and the wonder was, where he had got the money to pay his traveling expenses. It turned out that he had got it from the second Mrs. Manuel herself. She had filled his empty pockets; and there she was, waiting confidently in a miserable London lodging, to hear from him and join him as soon as he was safely settled in foreign parts! Where had *she* got the money, you may ask naturally enough? Nobody could tell at the time. My own notion is, now, that her former mistress must have been still living, and that she must have turned her knowledge of the Blanchards' family secret to profitable account at last. This is mere guess-work, of course; but there's a circumstance that makes it likely guess-work to my mind. She had an elderly female friend to apply to at the time, who was just the woman to help her in ferreting out her mistress's address. Can you guess the name of the elderly female friend? Not you! Mrs. Oldershaw, of course!"

Mr. Bashwood suddenly looked up. "Why should she go back," he asked, "to the woman who had deserted her when she was a child?"

"I can't say," rejoined his son, "unless she went back in the interests of her own magnificent head of hair. The prison-scissors, I needn't tell you, had made short work of it with Miss Gwilt's love-locks, in every sense of the word and Mrs. Oldershaw, I beg to add, is the most eminent woman in England, as restorer-general of the dilapidated heads and faces of the female sex. Put two and two together; and perhaps you'll agree with me, in this case, that they make four."

"Yes, yes; two and two make four," repeated his father, impatiently. "But I want to know something else. Did she hear from him again? Did he send for her after he had gone away to foreign parts?"

"The captain? Why, what on earth can you be thinking of? Hadn't he spent every farthing of her money? and wasn't he loose on the Continent out of her reach? She waited to hear from him. I dare say, for she persisted in believing in him. But I'll lay you any wager you like, she never saw the sight of his handwriting again. We did our best at the office to open her eyes; we told her plainly that he had a first wife living, and that she hadn't the shadow of a claim on him. She wouldn't believe us, though we met her with the evidence. Obstinate, devilish obstinate. I dare say she waited for months together before she gave up the last hope of ever seeing him again."

Mr. Bashwood looked aside quickly out of the cab window. "Where could she turn for refuge next?" he said, not to his son, but to himself. "What, in Heaven's name, could she do?"

"Judging by my experience of women," remarked Bashwood the younger, overhearing him, "I should say she probably tried to drown herself. But that's only guess-work again: it's all guess-work at this part of her story. You catch me at the end of my evidence, dad, when you come to Miss Gwilt's proceedings in the spring and summer of the present year. She might, or she might not, have been desperate enough to attempt suicide; and she might, or she might not, have been at the bottom of those inquiries that I made for Mrs. Oldershaw. I dare say you'll see her this morning; and perhaps, if you use your influence, you may be able to make her finish her own story herself."

Mr. Bashwood, still looking out of the cab window, suddenly laid his hand on his son's arm.

"Hush! hush!" he exclaimed, in violent agitation. "We have got there at last. Oh, Jemmy, feel how my heart beats! Here is the hotel."

"Bother your heart," said Bashwood the younger. "Wait here while I make the inquiries."

"I'll come with you!" cried his father. "I can't wait! I tell you, I can't wait!"

They went into the hotel together, and asked for "Mr. Armadale."

The answer, after some little hesitation and delay, was that Mr. Armadale had gone away six days since. A second waiter added that Mr. Armadale's friend – Mr. Midwinter – had only left that morning. Where had Mr. Armadale gone? Somewhere into the country. Where had Mr. Midwinter gone? Nobody knew.

Mr. Bashwood looked at his son in speechless and helpless dismay.

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Bashwood the younger, pushing his father back roughly into the cab. "He's safe enough. We shall find him at Miss Gwilt's."

The old man took his son's hand and kissed it. "Thank you, my dear," he said, gratefully. "Thank you for comforting me."

The cab was driven next to the second lodging which Miss Gwilt had occupied, in the neighborhood of Tottenham Court Road.

"Stop here," said the spy, getting out, and shutting his father into the cab. "I mean to manage this part of the business myself."

He knocked at the house door. "I have got a note for Miss Gwilt," he said, walking into the passage, the moment the door was opened.

"She's gone," answered the servant. "She went away last night."

Bashwood the younger wasted no more words with the servant. He insisted on seeing the mistress. The mistress confirmed the announcement of Miss Gwilt's departure on the previous evening. Where had she gone to? The woman couldn't say. How had she left? On foot. At what hour? Between nine and ten. What had she done with her luggage? She had no luggage. Had a gentleman been to see her on the previous day? Not a soul, gentle or simple, had come to the house to see Miss Gwilt.

The father's face, pale and wild, was looking out of the cab window as the son descended the house steps. "Isn't she there, Jemmy?" he asked, faintly — "isn't she there?"

"Hold your tongue," cried the spy, with the native coarseness of his nature rising to the surface at last. "I'm not at the end of my inquiries yet."

He crossed the road, and entered a coffee-shop situated exactly opposite the house he had just left.

In the box nearest the window two men were sitting talking together anxiously.

"Which of you was on duty yesterday evening, between nine and ten o'clock?" asked Bashwood the younger, suddenly joining them, and putting his question in a quick, peremptory whisper.

"I was, sir," said one of the men, unwillingly.

"Did you lose sight of the house? — Yes! I see you did."

"Only for a minute, sir. An infernal blackguard of a soldier came in —"

"That will do," said Bashwood the younger. "I know what the soldier did, and who sent him to do it. She has given us the slip again. You are the greatest ass living. Consider yourself dismissed." With those words, and with an oath to emphasize them, he left the coffee-shop and returned to the cab.

"She's gone!" cried his father. "Oh, Jemmy, Jemmy, I see it in your face!" He fell back into his own corner of the cab, with a faint, wailing cry. "They're married," he moaned to himself; his hands falling helplessly on his knees; his hat falling unregarded from his head. "Stop them!" he exclaimed, suddenly rousing himself, and seizing his son in a frenzy by the collar of the coat.

"Go back to the hotel," shouted Bashwood the younger to the cabman. "Hold your noise!" he added, turning fiercely on his father. "I want to think."

The varnish of smoothness was all off him by this time. His temper was roused. His pride – even such a man has his pride! – was wounded to the quick. Twice had he matched his wits against a woman's; and twice the woman had baffled him.

He got out, on reaching the hotel for the second time, and privately tried the servants with the offer of money. The result of the experiment satisfied him that they had, in this instance, really and truly no information to sell. After a moment's reflection, he stopped, before leaving the hotel, to ask the way to the parish church. "The chance may be worth trying," he thought to himself, as he gave the address to the driver. "Faster!" he called out, looking first at his watch, and then at his father. "The minutes are precious this morning; and the old one is beginning to give in."

It was true. Still capable of hearing and of understanding, Mr. Bashwood was past speaking by this time. He clung with both hands to his son's grudging arm, and let his head fall helplessly on his son's averted shoulder.

The parish church stood back from the street, protected by gates and railings, and surrounded by a space of open ground. Shaking off his father's hold, Bashwood the younger made straight for the vestry. The clerk, putting away the books, and the clerk's assistant, hanging up a surplice, were the only per-

sons in the room when he entered it and asked leave to look at the marriage register for the day.

The clerk gravely opened the book, and stood aside from the desk on which it lay.

The day's register comprised three marriages solemnized that morning; and the first two signatures on the page were "Allan Armadale" and "Lydia Gwilt!"

Even the spy – ignorant as he was of the truth, unsuspecting as he was of the terrible future consequences to which the act of that morning might lead – even the spy started, when his eye first fell on the page. It was done! Come what might of it, it was done now. There, in black and white, was the registered evidence of the marriage, which was at once a truth in itself, and a lie in the conclusion to which it led! There – through the fatal similarity in the names – there, in Midwinter's own signature, was the proof to persuade everybody that, not Midwinter, but Allan, was the husband of Miss Gwilt!

Bashwood the younger closed the book, and returned it to the clerk. He descended the vestry steps, with his hands thrust doggedly into his pockets, and with a serious shock inflicted on his professional self-esteem.

The beadle met him under the church wall. He considered for a moment whether it was worth while to spend a shilling in questioning the man, and decided in the affirmative. If they could be traced and overtaken, there might be a chance of seeing the color of Mr. Armadale's money even yet.

"How long is it," he asked, "since the first couple married here this morning left the church?"

"About an hour," said the beadle.

"How did they go away?"

The beadle deferred answering that second question until he had first pocketed his fee.

"You won't trace them from here, sir," he said, when he had got his shilling. "They went away on foot."

"And that is all you know about it?"

"That, sir, is all I know about it."

Left by himself, even the Detective of the Private Inquiry Office paused for a moment before he returned to his father at the gate. He was roused from his hesitation by the sudden appearance, within the church inclosure, of the driver of the cab.

"I'm afraid the old gentleman is going to be taken ill, sir," said the man.

Bashwood the younger frowned angrily, and walked back to the cab. As he opened the door and looked in, his father leaned forward and confronted him, with lips that moved speechlessly, and with a white stillness over all the rest of his face.

"She's done us," said the spy. "They were married here this morning."

The old man's body swayed for a moment from one side to the other. The instant after, his eyes closed and his head fell forward toward the front seat of the cab. "Drive to the hospital!" cried his son. "He's in a fit. This is what comes of putting myself out of my way to please my father," he muttered, sullenly raising Mr. Bashwood's head, and loosening his cravat. "A nice morning's work. Upon my soul, a nice morning's work!"

The hospital was near, and the house surgeon was at his post.

"Will he come out of it?" asked Bashwood the younger, roughly.

"Who are *you*?" asked the surgeon, sharply, on his side.

"I am his son."

"I shouldn't have thought it," rejoined the surgeon, taking the restoratives that were handed to him by the nurse, and turning from the son to the father with an air of relief which he was at no pains to conceal. "Yes," he added, after a minute or two; "your father will come out of it this time."

"When can he be moved away from here?"

"He can be moved from the hospital in an hour or two."

The spy laid a card on the table. "I'll come back for him or send for him," he said. "I suppose I can go now, if I leave my name and address?" With those words, he put on his hat, and walked out.

"He's a brute!" said the nurse.

"No," said the surgeon, quietly. "He's a man."

Between nine and ten o'clock that night, Mr. Bashwood awoke in his bed at the inn in the Borough. He had slept for some hours since he had been brought back from the hospital; and his mind and body were now slowly recovering together.

A light was burning on the bedside table, and a letter lay on it, waiting for him till he was awake. It was in his son's handwriting, and it contained these words:

“MY DEAR DAD — Having seen you safe out of the hospital, and back at your hotel, I think I may fairly claim to have done my duty by you, and may consider myself free to look after my own affairs. Business will prevent me from seeing you to-night; and I don’t think it at all likely I shall be in your neighborhood to-morrow morning. My advice to you is to go back to Thorpe Ambrose, and to stick to your employment in the steward’s office. Wherever Mr. Armadale may be, he must, sooner or later, write to you on business. I wash my hands of the whole matter, mind, so far as I am concerned, from this time forth. But if you like to go on with it, my professional opinion is (though you couldn’t hinder his marriage), you may part him from his wife.

“Pray take care of yourself.

“Your affectionate son,

“JAMES BASHWOOD.”

The letter dropped from the old man’s feeble hands. “I wish Jemmy could have come to see me to-night,” he thought. “But it’s very kind of him to advise me, all the same.”

He turned wearily on the pillow, and read the letter a second time. “Yes,” he said, “there’s nothing left for me but to go back. I’m too poor and too old to hunt after them all by myself.” He closed his eyes: the tears trickled slowly over his wrinkled cheeks. “I’ve been a trouble to Jemmy,” he murmured, faintly; “I’ve been a sad trouble, I’m afraid, to poor Jemmy!” In a minute more his weakness overpowered him, and he fell asleep again.

The clock of the neighboring church struck. It was ten. As the bell tolled the hour, the tidal train – with Midwinter and his wife among the passengers – was speeding nearer and nearer to Paris. As the bell tolled the hour, the watch on board Allan's outward-bound yacht had sighted the light-house off the Land's End, and had set the course of the vessel for Ushant and Finisterre.

THE END OF THE THIRD BOOK.

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