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1876

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ABOUT AUTHOR



Wilkie Collins (*1824–1889*) was a pioneering English Victorian author who fathered the modern English detective novel. Renowned for intricate plots and suspense, his most famous works, *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868), revolutionized mystery and sensation fiction.

Key Works:

- **The Woman in White (1860):** The archetypal "sensation novel," famous for its multiple narrators and gripping mystery.
- **The Moonstone (1868):** Widely celebrated as the first true English detective novel and a pioneer of the police procedural genre.
- **Armadale (1866) & No Name (1862):** Further examples of his complex plotting and exploration of social issues.

Life & Legacy:

- **Partnership with Dickens:** Collins was a close friend, mentor, and collaborator of Charles Dickens. They often co-wrote plays and published fiction in Dickens' magazines, such as *All the Year Round*.
- **Unconventional Lifestyle:** A vocal critic of Victorian marriage, Collins never married. He divided his time between his long-term partner Caroline Graves and his common-law wife Martha Rudd.
- **Opium Addiction:** Collins suffered from chronic gout and arthritis, leading to a severe addiction to laudanum (an opium-alcohol mix). He famously hallucinated parts of *The Moonstone* while under the drug's influence.

PREFACE

A Shocking Verdict.

A Stigmatized Husband.

A Woman's Ruthless Quest for Justice.

Valeria Brinton has just married the love of her life, Eustace Woodville, believing a future of absolute happiness awaits them. But her world is instantly shattered during their honeymoon when a dark, hidden secret about her husband's past comes to light. Eustace has been living under a false name to escape a horrific stigma. Years earlier, he was put on trial for the brutal murder of his first wife. The Scottish court delivered a devastating and ambiguous verdict unique to their legal system: "Not Proven." Neither legally guilty nor fully cleared, Eustace is cast back into society as a marked man.

While everyone, including her own family, urges Valeria to abandon her disgraced husband, she refuses to let an incomplete law dictate their destiny. Driven by an

unbreakable devotion and a fierce analytical mind, she launches her own independent investigation into the cold case. Weaponizing her intellect against a wall of societal prejudice, missing documents, and deceptive witnesses, she descends into a dangerous web of family secrets to find the definitive proof that will clear Eustace's name. How far will a woman go to uncover the truth when the law itself has failed?

Experience one of Wilkie Collins's most progressive, thrilling, and masterfully constructed sensation novels. Featuring the groundbreaking debut of one of literature's very first female detectives, this definitive classic delivers a fast-paced legal mystery and a breathtaking psychological drama that challenges the hypocrisies of Victorian society until the final, shocking revelation.

NOTE

ADDRESSED TO THE READER

In offering this book to you, I have no Preface to write. I have only to request that you will bear in mind certain established truths, which occasionally escape your memory when you are reading a work of fiction. Be pleased, then, to remember (First): That the actions of human beings are not invariably governed by the laws of pure reason. (Secondly): That we are by no means always in the habit of bestowing our love on the objects which are the most deserving of it, in the opinions of our friends. (Thirdly and Lastly): That Characters which may not have appeared, and Events which may not have taken place, within the limits of our own individual experience, may nevertheless be perfectly natural Characters and perfectly probable Events, for all that. Having said these few words, I have said all that seems to be necessary at the present time, in presenting my new Story to your notice.

W. C.

London, February 1, 1875.

PART I: PARADISE LOST

I

THE BRIDE'S MISTAKE

"For after this manner in the old time the holy women also who trusted in God adorned themselves, being in subjection unto their own husbands; even as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord; whose daughters ye are as long as ye do well, and are not afraid with any amazement."

Concluding the marriage service of the Church of England in those well-known words, my uncle Starkweather shut up his book, and looked at me across the altar rails with a hearty expression of interest on his broad, red face. At the same time my aunt, Mrs. Starkweather, standing by my side, tapped me smartly on the shoulder, and said,

"Valeria, you are married!"

Where were my thoughts? What had become of my attention? I was too bewildered to know. I started and looked at my new husband. He seemed to be almost as much bewildered as I was. The same thought had, as I

believe, occurred to us both at the same moment. Was it really possible—in spite of his mother's opposition to our marriage—that we were man and wife? My aunt Starkweather settled the question by a second tap on my shoulder.

"Take his arm!" she whispered, in the tone of a woman who had lost all patience with me.

I took his arm.

"Follow your uncle."

Holding fast by my husband's arm, I followed my uncle and the curate who had assisted him at the marriage.

The two clergymen led us into the vestry. The church was in one of the dreary quarters of London, situated between the City and the West End; the day was dull; the atmosphere was heavy and damp. We were a melancholy little wedding party, worthy of the dreary neighborhood and the dull day. No relatives or friends of my husband's were present; his family, as I have already hinted, disapproved of his marriage. Except my uncle and my aunt, no other relations appeared on my side. I had lost both my parents, and I had but few friends. My dear father's faithful old clerk, Benjamin, attended the wedding to "give me away," as the phrase is. He had known me from a child, and, in my forlorn position, he was as good as a father to me.

The last ceremony left to be performed was, as usual, the signing of the marriage register. In the confusion of the moment (and in the absence of any information to guide me) I committed a mistake—ominous, in my aunt Starkweather's opinion, of evil to come. I signed my married

instead of my maiden name.

"What!" cried my uncle, in his loudest and cheeriest tones, "you have forgotten your own name already? Well, well! let us hope you will never repent parting with it so readily. Try again, Valeria—try again."

With trembling fingers I struck the pen through my first effort, and wrote my maiden name, very badly indeed, as follows:



When it came to my husband's turn I noticed, with surprise, that his hand trembled too, and that he produced a very poor specimen of his customary signature:



My aunt, on being requested to sign, complied under protest. "A bad beginning!" she said, pointing to my first unfortunate signature with the feather end of her pen. "I hope, my dear, you may not live to regret it."

Even then, in the days of my ignorance and my innocence, that curious outbreak of my aunt's superstition produced a certain uneasy sensation in my mind. It was a consolation to me to feel the reassuring pressure of my husband's hand. It was an indescribable relief to hear my uncle's hearty voice wishing me a happy life at parting. The good man had left his north-country vicarage (my home since the death of my parents) expressly to read the service at my marriage; and he and my aunt had arranged to return by the midday train. [12]

He folded me in his great strong arms, and he gave me a kiss which must certainly have been heard by the idlers waiting for the bride and bridegroom outside the church door.

"I wish you health and happiness, my love, with all my heart. You are old enough to choose for yourself, and—no offense, Mr. Woodville, you and I are new friends—and I pray God, Valeria, it may turn out that you have chosen well. Our house will be dreary enough without you; but I don't complain, my dear. On the contrary, if this change in your life makes you happier, I rejoice. Come, come! don't cry, or you will set your aunt off—and it's no joke at her time of life. Besides, crying will spoil your beauty. Dry your eyes and look in the glass there, and you will see that I am right. Goodbye, child—and God bless you!"

He tucked my aunt under his arm, and hurried out. My heart sank a little, dearly as I loved my husband, when I had seen the last of the true friend and protector of my maiden days.

The parting with old Benjamin came next. "I wish you well, my dear; don't forget me," was all he said. But the old days at home came back on me at those few words. Benjamin always dined with us on Sundays in my father's time, and always brought some little present with him for his master's child. I was very near to "spoiling my beauty" (as my uncle had put it) when I offered the old man my cheek to kiss, and heard him sigh to himself, as if he too were not quite hopeful about my future life.

My husband's voice roused me, and turned my mind to happier thoughts.

"Shall we go, Valeria?" he asked.

I stopped him on our way out to take advantage of my uncle's advice; in other words, to see how I looked in the glass over the vestry fireplace.

What does the glass show me?

The glass shows a tall and slender young woman of three-and-twenty years of age. She is not at all the sort of person who attracts attention in the street, seeing that she fails to exhibit the popular yellow hair and the popular painted cheeks. Her hair is black; dressed, in these later days (as it was dressed years since to please her father), in broad ripples drawn back from the forehead, and gathered into a simple knot behind (like the hair of the Venus de Medicis), so as to show the neck beneath. Her complexion is pale: except in moments of violent agitation there is no color to be seen in her face. Her eyes are of so dark a blue that they are generally mistaken for black. Her eyebrows are well enough in form, but they are too dark and too strongly marked. Her nose just inclines toward the aquiline bend, and is considered a little too large by persons difficult to please in the matter of noses. The mouth, her best feature, is very delicately shaped, and is capable of presenting great varieties of expression. As to the face in general, it is too narrow and too long at the lower part, too broad and too low in the higher regions of the eyes and the head. The whole picture, as reflected in the glass, represents a woman of some elegance, rather too pale, and rather too sedate and serious in her moments of silence and repose—in short, a person who fails to strike the ordinary observer at first sight, but who gains in general estimation on a second, and

sometimes on a third view. As for her dress, it studiously conceals, instead of proclaiming, that she has been married that morning. She wears a gray cashmere tunic trimmed with gray silk, and having a skirt of the same material and color beneath it. On her head is a bonnet to match, relieved by a quilling of white muslin with one deep red rose, as a morsel of positive color, to complete the effect of the whole dress.

Have I succeeded or failed in describing the picture of myself which I see in the glass? It is not for me to say. I have done my best to keep clear of the two vanities—the vanity of depreciating and the vanity of praising my own personal appearance. For the rest, well written or badly written, thank Heaven it is done!

And whom do I see in the glass standing by my side?

I see a man who is not quite so tall as I am, and who has the misfortune of looking older than his years. His forehead is prematurely bald. His big chestnut-colored beard and his long overhanging mustache are prematurely streaked with gray. He has the color in the face which my face wants, and the firmness in his figure which my figure wants. He looks at me with the tenderest and gentlest eyes (of a light brown) that I ever saw in the countenance of a man. His smile is rare and sweet; his manner, perfectly quiet and retiring, has yet a latent persuasiveness in it which is (to women) irresistibly winning. He just halts a little in his walk, from the effect of an injury received in past years, when he was a soldier serving in India, and he carries a thick bamboo cane, with a curious crutch handle (an old favorite), to help himself along whenever he gets on his feet, indoors or out.

With this one little drawback (if it is a drawback), there is nothing infirm or old or awkward about him; his slight limp when he walks has (perhaps to my partial eyes) a certain quaint grace of its own, which is pleasanter to see than the unrestrained activity of other men. And last and best of all, I love him! I love him! I love him! And there is an end of my portrait of my husband on our wedding-day.

The glass has told me all I want to know. We leave the vestry at last.

The sky, cloudy since the morning, has darkened while we have been in the church, and the rain is beginning to fall heavily. The idlers outside stare at us grimly under their umbrellas as we pass through their ranks and hasten into our carriage. No cheering; no sunshine; no flowers strewn in our path; no grand breakfast; no genial speeches; no bridesmaids; no fathers or mother's blessing. A dreary wedding—there is no denying it—and (if Aunt Starkweather is right) a bad beginning as well!

A coupé has been reserved for us at the railway station. The attentive porter, on the lookout for his fee, pulls down the blinds over the side windows of the carriage, and shuts out all prying eyes in that way. After what seems to be an interminable delay the train starts. My husband winds his arm round me. "At last!" he whispers, with love in his eyes that no words can utter, and presses me to him gently. My arm steals round his neck; my eyes answer his eyes. Our lips meet in the first long, lingering kiss of our married life.

Oh, what recollections of that journey rise in me as I write! Let me dry my eyes, and shut up my paper for the day.

II

THE BRIDE'S THOUGHTS

We had been traveling for a little more than an hour when a change passed insensibly over us both.

Still sitting close together, with my hand in his, with my head on his shoulder, little by little we fell insensibly into silence. Had we already exhausted the narrow yet eloquent vocabulary of love? Or had we determined by unexpressed consent, after enjoying the luxury of passion that speaks, to try the deeper and finer rapture of passion that thinks? I can hardly determine; I only know that a time came when, under some strange influence, our lips were closed toward each other. We traveled along, each of us absorbed in our own reverie. Was he thinking exclusively of me—as I was thinking exclusively of him? Before the journey's end I had my doubts; at a little later time I knew for certain that his thoughts, wandering far away from his young wife, were all turned inward on his own unhappy self.

For me the secret pleasure of filling my mind with him, while I felt him by my side, was a luxury in itself.

I pictured in my thoughts our first meeting in the neighborhood of my uncle's house.

Our famous north-country trout stream wound its flashing and foaming way through a ravine in the rocky moorland. It was a windy, shadowy evening. A heavily clouded sunset lay low and red in the west. A solitary angler stood casting his fly at a turn in the stream where the

backwater lay still and deep under an overhanging bank. A girl (myself) standing on the bank, invisible to the fisherman beneath, waited eagerly to see the trout rise.

The moment came; the fish took the fly.

Sometimes on the little level strip of sand at the foot of the bank, sometimes (when the stream turned again) in the shallower water rushing over its rocky bed, the angler followed the captured trout, now letting the line run out and now winding it in again, in the difficult and delicate process of "playing" the fish. Along the bank I followed to watch the contest of skill and cunning between the man and the trout. I had lived long enough with my uncle Starkweather to catch some of his enthusiasm for field sports, and to learn something, especially, of the angler's art. Still following the stranger, with my eyes intently fixed on every movement of his rod and line, and with not so much as a chance fragment of my attention to spare for the rough path along which I was walking, I stepped by chance on the loose overhanging earth at the edge of the bank, and fell into the stream in an instant.

The distance was trifling, the water was shallow, the bed of the river was (fortunately for me) of sand. Beyond the fright and the wetting I had nothing to complain of. In a few moments I was out of the water and up again, very much ashamed of myself, on the firm ground. Short as the interval was, it proved long enough to favor the escape of the fish. The angler had heard my first instinctive cry of alarm, had turned, and had thrown aside his rod to help me. We confronted each other for the first time, I on the bank and he in the shallow water below. Our eyes encountered, and I

verily believe our hearts encountered at the same moment. This I know for certain, we forgot our breeding as lady and gentleman: we looked at each other in barbarous silence.

I was the first to recover myself. What did I say to him?

I said something about my not being hurt, and then something more, urging him to run back and try if he might not yet recover the fish.

He went back unwillingly. He returned to me—of course without the fish. Knowing how bitterly disappointed my uncle would have been in his place, I apologized very earnestly. In my eagerness to make atonement, I even offered to show him a spot where he might try again, lower down the stream.

He would not hear of it; he entreated me to go home and change my wet dress. I cared nothing for the wetting, but I obeyed him without knowing why.

He walked with me. My way back to the vicarage was his way back to the inn. He had come to our parts, he told me, for the quiet and retirement as much as for the fishing. He had noticed me once or twice from the window of his room at the inn. He asked if I were not the vicar's daughter.

I set him right. I told him that the vicar had married my mother's sister, and that the two had been father and mother to me since the death of my parents. He asked if he might venture to call on Doctor Starkweather the next day, mentioning the name of a friend of his, with whom he believed the vicar to be acquainted. I invited him to visit us, as if it had been my house; I was spellbound under his eyes and under his voice. I had fancied, honestly fancied, myself

to have been in love often and often before this time. Never in any other man's company had I felt as I now felt in the presence of *this* man. Night seemed to fall suddenly over the evening landscape when he left me. I leaned against the vicarage gate. I could not breathe, I could not think; my heart fluttered as if it would fly out of my bosom—and all this for a stranger! I burned with shame; but oh, in spite of it all, I was so happy!

And now, when little more than a few weeks had passed since that first meeting, I had him by my side; he was mine for life! I lifted my head from his bosom to look at him. I was like a child with a new toy—I wanted to make sure that he was really my own.

He never noticed the action; he never moved in his corner of the carriage. Was he deep in his own thoughts? and were they thoughts of Me?

I laid down my head again softly, so as not to disturb him. My thoughts wandered backward once more, and showed me another picture in the golden gallery of the past.

The garden at the vicarage formed the new scene. The time was night. We had met together in secret. We were walking slowly to and fro, out of sight of the house, now in the shadowy paths of the shrubbery, now in the lovely moonlight on the open lawn.

We had long since owned our love and devoted our lives to each other. Already our interests were one; already we shared the pleasures and the pains of life. I had gone out to meet him that night with a heavy heart, to seek comfort in

his presence and to find encouragement in his voice. He noticed that I sighed when he first took me in his arms, and he gently turned my head toward the moonlight to read my trouble in my face. How often he had read my happiness there in the earlier days of our love!

"You bring bad news, my angel," he said, lifting my hair tenderly from my forehead as he spoke. "I see the lines here which tell me of anxiety and distress. I almost wish I loved you less dearly, Valeria."

"Why?"

"I might give you back your freedom. I have only to leave this place, and your uncle would be satisfied, and you would be relieved from all the cares that are pressing on you now."

"Don't speak of it, Eustace! If you want me to forget my cares, say you love me more dearly than ever."

He said it in a kiss. We had a moment of exquisite forgetfulness of the hard ways of life—a moment of delicious absorption in each other. I came back to realities fortified and composed, rewarded for all that I had gone through, ready to go through it all over again for another kiss. Only give a woman love, and there is nothing she will not venture, suffer, and do.

"Have they been raising fresh objections to our marriage?" he asked, as we slowly walked on again.

"No, they have done with objecting. They have remembered at last that I am of age, and that I can choose for myself. They have been pleading with me, Eustace, to give you up. My aunt, whom I thought rather a hard woman, has been crying—for the first time in my experience of her.

My uncle, always kind and good to me, has been kinder and better than ever. He has told me that if I persist in becoming your wife, I shall not be deserted on my wedding-day. Wherever we may marry, he will be there to read the service, and my aunt will go to the church with me. But he entreats me to consider seriously what I am doing—to consent to a separation from you for a time—to consult other people on my position toward you, if I am not satisfied with his opinion. Oh, my darling, they are as anxious to part us as if you were the worst instead of the best of men!"

"Has anything happened since yesterday to increase their distrust of me?" he asked.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"You remember referring my uncle to a friend of yours and of his?"

"Yes. To Major Fitz-David."

"My uncle has written to Major Fitz-David."

"Why?"

He pronounced that one word in a tone so utterly unlike his natural tone that his voice sounded quite strange to me.

"You won't be angry, Eustace, if I tell you?" I said. "My uncle, as I understood him, had several motives for writing to the major. One of them was to inquire if he knew your mother's address."

Eustace suddenly stood still.

I paused at the same moment, feeling that I could venture

no further without the risk of offending him.

To speak the truth, his conduct, when he first mentioned our engagement to my uncle, had been (so far as appearances went) a little flighty and strange. The vicar had naturally questioned him about his family. He had answered that his father was dead; and he had consented, though not very readily, to announce his contemplated marriage to his mother. Informing us that she too lived in the country, he had gone to see her, without more particularly mentioning her address. In two days he had returned to the vicarage with a very startling message. His mother intended no disrespect to me or my relatives, but she disapproved so absolutely of her son's marriage that she (and the members of her family, who all agreed with her) would refuse to be present at the ceremony, if Mr. Woodville persisted in keeping his engagement with Dr. Starkweather's niece. Being asked to explain this extraordinary communication, Eustace had told us that his mother and his sisters were bent on his marrying another lady, and that they were bitterly mortified and disappointed by his choosing a stranger to the family. This explanation was enough for me; it implied, so far as I was concerned, a compliment to my superior influence over Eustace, which a woman always receives with pleasure. But it failed to satisfy my uncle and my aunt. The vicar expressed to Mr. Woodville a wish to write to his mother, or to see her, on the subject of her strange message. Eustace obstinately declined to mention his mother's address, on the ground that the vicar's interference would be utterly useless. My uncle at once drew the conclusion that the mystery about the address indicated something wrong. He refused to favor Mr.

Woodville's renewed proposal for my hand, and he wrote the same day to make inquiries of Mr. Woodville's reference and of his own friend Major Fitz-David.

Under such circumstances as these, to speak of my uncle's motives was to venture on very delicate ground. Eustace relieved me from further embarrassment by asking a question to which I could easily reply.

"Has your uncle received any answer from Major Fitz-David?" he inquired.

"Yes."

"Were you allowed to read it?" His voice sank as he said those words; his face betrayed a sudden anxiety which it pained me to see.

"I have got the answer with me to show you," I said.

He almost snatched the letter out of my hand; he turned his back on me to read it by the light of the moon. The letter was short enough to be soon read. I could have repeated it at the time. I can repeat it now.

"DEAR VICAR—Mr. Eustace Woodville is quite correct in stating to you that he is a gentleman by birth and position, and that he inherits (under his deceased father's will) an independent fortune of two thousand a year.

"Always yours,
LAWRENCE FITZ-DAVID."

"Can anybody wish for a plainer answer than that?" Eustace asked, handing the letter back to me.

"If *I* had written for information about you," I answered, "it would have been plain enough for me."

“Is it not plain enough for your uncle?”

“No.”

“What does he say?”

“Why need you care to know, my darling?”

“I want to know, Valeria. There must be no secret between us in this matter. Did your uncle say anything when he showed you the major’s letter?”

“Yes.”

“What was it?”

“My uncle told me that his letter of inquiry filled three pages, and he bade me observe that the major’s answer contained one sentence only. He said, ‘I volunteered to go to Major Fitz-David and talk the matter over. You see he takes no notice of my proposal. I asked him for the address of Mr. Woodville’s mother. He passes over my request, as he has passed over my proposal—he studiously confines himself to the shortest possible statement of bare facts. Use your common-sense, Valeria. Isn’t this rudeness rather remarkable on the part of a man who is a gentleman by birth and breeding, and who is also a friend of mine?’ ”

Eustace stopped me there.

“Did you answer your uncle’s question?” he asked.

“No,” I replied. “I only said that I did not understand the major’s conduct.”

“And what did your uncle say next? If you love me, Valeria, tell me the truth.”

“He used very strong language, Eustace. He is an old man;

you must not be offended with him."

"I am not offended. What did he say?"

"He said, 'Mark my words! There is something under the surface in connection with Mr. Woodville, or with his family, to which Major Fitz-David is not at liberty to allude. Properly interpreted, Valeria, that letter is a warning. Show it to Mr. Woodville, and tell him (if you like) what I have just told you—' "

Eustace stopped me again.

"You are sure your uncle said those words?" he asked, scanning my face attentively in the moonlight.

"Quite sure. But I don't say what my uncle says. Pray don't think that!"

He suddenly pressed me to his bosom, and fixed his eyes on mine. His look frightened me.

"Goodbye, Valeria!" he said. "Try and think kindly of me, my darling, when you are married to some happier man."

He attempted to leave me. I clung to him in an agony of terror that shook me from head to foot.

"What do you mean?" I asked, as soon as I could speak. "I am yours and yours only. What have I said, what have I done, to deserve those dreadful words?"

"We must part, my angel," he answered, sadly. "The fault is none of yours; the misfortune is all mine. My Valeria! how can you marry a man who is an object of suspicion to your nearest and dearest friends? I have led a dreary life. I have never found in any other woman the sympathy with me, the sweet comfort and companionship, that I find in you. Oh, it

is hard to lose you! it is hard to go back again to my unfriended life! I must make the sacrifice, love, for your sake. I know no more why that letter is what it is than you do. Will your uncle believe me? will your friends believe me? One last kiss, Valeria! Forgive me for having loved you—passionately, devotedly loved you. Forgive me—and let me go!"

I held him desperately, recklessly. His eyes, put me beside myself; his words filled me with a frenzy of despair.

"Go where you may," I said, "I go with you! Friends—reputation—I care nothing who I lose, or what I lose! Oh, Eustace, I am only a woman—don't madden me! I can't live without you. I must and will be your wife!"

Those wild words were all I could say before the misery and madness in me forced their way outward in a burst of sobs and tears.

He yielded. He soothed me with his charming voice; he brought me back to myself with his tender caresses. He called the bright heaven above us to witness that he devoted his whole life to me. He vowed—oh, in such solemn, such eloquent words!—that his one thought, night and day, should be to prove himself worthy of such love as mine. And had he not nobly redeemed the pledge? Had not the betrothal of that memorable night been followed by the betrothal at the altar, by the vows before God! Ah, what a life was before me! What more than mortal happiness was mine!

Again I lifted my head from his bosom to taste the dear delight of seeing him by my side—my life, my love, my husband, my own!

Hardly awakened yet from the absorbing memories of the past to the sweet realities of the present, I let my cheek touch his cheek, I whispered to him softly, “Oh, how I love you! how I love you!”

The next instant I started back from him. My heart stood still. I put my hand up to my face. What did I feel on my cheek? (*I* had not been weeping—I was too happy.) What did I feel on my cheek? A tear!

His face was still averted from me. I turned it toward me, with my own hands, by main force.

I looked at him—and saw my husband, on our wedding-day, with his eyes full of tears.

III

RAMSGATE SANDS

Eustace succeeded in quieting my alarm. But I can hardly say that he succeeded in satisfying my mind as well.

He had been thinking, he told me, of the contrast between his past and his present life. Bitter remembrance of the years that had gone had risen in his memory, and had filled him with melancholy misgivings of his capacity to make my life with him a happy one. He had asked himself if he had not met me too late—if he were not already a man soured and broken by the disappointments and disenchantments of the past? Doubts such as these, weighing more and more heavily on his mind, had filled his eyes with the tears which I had discovered—tears which he now entreated me, by my love for him, to dismiss from my memory forever.

I forgave him, comforted him, revived him; but there were moments when the remembrance of what I had seen troubled me in secret, and when I asked myself if I really possessed my husband's full confidence as he possessed mine.

We left the train at Ramsgate.

The favorite watering-place was empty; the season was just over. Our arrangements for the wedding tour included a cruise to the Mediterranean in a yacht lent to Eustace by a friend. We were both fond of the sea, and we were equally desirous, considering the circumstances under which we had married, of escaping the notice of friends and

acquaintances. With this object in view, having celebrated our marriage privately in London, we had decided on instructing the sailing-master of the yacht to join us at Ramsgate. At this port (when the season for visitors was at an end) we could embark far more privately than at the popular yachting stations situated in the Isle of Wight.

Three days passed—days of delicious solitude, of exquisite happiness, never to be forgotten, never to be lived over again, to the end of our lives!

Early on the morning of the fourth day, just before sunrise, a trifling incident happened, which was noticeable, nevertheless, as being strange to me in my experience of myself.

I awoke, suddenly and unaccountably, from a deep and dreamless sleep with an all-pervading sensation of nervous uneasiness which I had never felt before. In the old days at the vicarage my capacity as a sound sleeper had been the subject of many a little harmless joke. From the moment when my head was on the pillow I had never known what it was to awake until the maid knocked at my door. At all seasons and times the long and uninterrupted repose of a child was the repose that I enjoyed.

And now I had awakened, without any assignable cause, hours before my usual time. I tried to compose myself to sleep again. The effort was useless. Such a restlessness possessed me that I was not even able to lie still in the bed. My husband was sleeping soundly by my side. In the fear of disturbing him I rose, and put on my dressing-gown and slippers.

I went to the window. The sun was just rising over the

calm gray sea. For a while the majestic spectacle before me exercised a tranquilizing influence on the irritable condition of my nerves. But ere long the old restlessness returned upon me. I walked slowly to and fro in the room, until I was weary of the monotony of the exercise. I took up a book, and laid it aside again. My attention wandered; the author was powerless to recall it. I got on my feet once more, and looked at Eustace, and admired him and loved him in his tranquil sleep. I went back to the window, and wearied of the beautiful morning. I sat down before the glass and looked at myself. How haggard and worn I was already, through awaking before my usual time! I rose again, not knowing what to do next. The confinement to the four walls of the room began to be intolerable to me. I opened the door that led into my husband's dressing-room, and entered it, to try if the change would relieve me.

The first object that I noticed was his dressing-case, open on the toilet-table.

I took out the bottles and pots and brushes and combs, the knives and scissors in one compartment, the writing materials in another. I smelled the perfumes and pomatums; I busily cleaned and dusted the bottles with my handkerchief as I took them out. Little by little I completely emptied the dressing-case. It was lined with blue velvet. In one corner I noticed a tiny slip of loose blue silk. Taking it between my finger and thumb, and drawing it upward, I discovered that there was a false bottom to the case, forming a secret compartment for letters and papers. In my strange condition—capricious, idle, inquisitive—it was an amusement to me to take out the papers, just as I had taken out everything else.

I found some receipted bills, which failed to interest me; some letters, which it is needless to say I laid aside after only looking at the addresses; and, under all, a photograph, face downward, with writing on the back of it. I looked at the writing, and saw these words:

"To my dear son, Eustace."

His mother! the woman who had so obstinately and mercilessly opposed herself to our marriage!

I eagerly turned the photograph, expecting to see a woman with a stern, ill-tempered, forbidding countenance. To my surprise, the face showed the remains of great beauty; the expression, though remarkably firm, was yet winning, tender, and kind. The gray hair was arranged in rows of little quaint old-fashioned curls on either side of the head, under a plain lace cap. At one corner of the mouth there was a mark, apparently a mole, which added to the characteristic peculiarity of the face. I looked and looked, fixing the portrait thoroughly in my mind. This woman, who had almost insulted me and my relatives, was, beyond all doubt or dispute, so far as appearances went, a person possessing unusual attractions—a person whom it would be a pleasure and a privilege to know.

I fell into deep thought. The discovery of the photograph quieted me as nothing had quieted me yet.

The striking of a clock downstairs in the hall warned me of the flight of time. I carefully put back all the objects in the dressing-case (beginning with the photograph) exactly as I had found them, and returned to the bedroom. As I looked at my husband, still sleeping peacefully, the question forced itself into my mind, What had made that genial, gentle

mother of his so sternly bent on parting us? so harshly and pitilessly resolute in asserting her disapproval of our marriage?

Could I put my question openly to Eustace when he awoke? No; I was afraid to venture that length. It had been tacitly understood between us that we were not to speak of his mother—and, besides, he might be angry if he knew that I had opened the private compartment of his dressing-case.

After breakfast that morning we had news at last of the yacht. The vessel was safely moored in the inner harbor, and the sailing-master was waiting to receive my husband's orders on board.

Eustace hesitated at asking me to accompany him to the yacht. It would be necessary for him to examine the inventory of the vessel, and to decide questions, not very interesting to a woman, relating to charts and barometers, provisions and water. He asked me if I would wait for his return. The day was enticingly beautiful, and the tide was on the ebb. I pleaded for a walk on the sands; and the landlady at our lodgings, who happened to be in the room at the time, volunteered to accompany me and take care of me. It was agreed that we should walk as far as we felt inclined in the direction of Broadstairs, and that Eustace should follow and meet us on the sands, after having completed his arrangements on board the yacht.

In half an hour more the landlady and I were out on the beach.

The scene on that fine autumn morning was nothing less

than enchanting. The brisk breeze, the brilliant sky, the flashing blue sea, the sun-bright cliffs and the tawny sands at their feet, the gliding procession of ships on the great marine highway of the English Channel—it was all so exhilarating, it was all so delightful, that I really believe if I had been by myself I could have danced for joy like a child. The one drawback to my happiness was the landlady's untiring tongue. She was a forward, good-natured, empty-headed woman, who persisted in talking, whether I listened or not, and who had a habit of perpetually addressing me as "Mrs. Woodville," which I thought a little overfamiliar as an assertion of equality from a person in her position to a person in mine.

We had been out, I should think, more than half an hour, when we overtook a lady walking before us on the beach.

Just as we were about to pass the stranger she took her handkerchief from her pocket, and accidentally drew out with it a letter, which fell unnoticed by her, on the sand. I was nearest to the letter, and I picked it up and offered it to the lady.

The instant she turned to thank me, I stood rooted to the spot. There was the original of the photographic portrait in the dressing-case! there was my husband's mother, standing face to face with me! I recognized the quaint little gray curls, the gentle, genial expression, the mole at the corner of the mouth. No mistake was possible. His mother herself!

The old lady, naturally enough, mistook my confusion for shyness. With perfect tact and kindness she entered into conversation with me. In another minute I was walking side

by side with the woman who had sternly repudiated me as a member of her family; feeling, I own, terribly discomposed, and not knowing in the least whether I ought or ought not to assume the responsibility, in my husband's absence, of telling her who I was.

In another minute my familiar landlady, walking on the other side of my mother-in-law, decided the question for me. I happened to say that I supposed we must by that time be near the end of our walk—the little watering-place called Broadstairs. "Oh no, Mrs. Woodville!" cried the irrepressible woman, calling me by my name, as usual; "nothing like so near as you think!"

I looked with a beating heart at the old lady.

To my unutterable amazement, not the faintest gleam of recognition appeared in her face. Old Mrs. Woodville went on talking to young Mrs. Woodville just as composedly as if she had never heard her own name before in her life!

My face and manner must have betrayed something of the agitation that I was suffering. Happening to look at me at the end of her next sentence, the old lady started, and said, in her kindly way,

"I am afraid you have overexerted yourself. You are very pale—you are looking quite exhausted. Come and sit down here; let me lend you my smelling-bottle."

I followed her, quite helplessly, to the base of the cliff. Some fallen fragments of chalk offered us a seat. I vaguely heard the voluble landlady's expressions of sympathy and regret; I mechanically took the smelling-bottle which my husband's mother offered to me, *after hearing my name*, as

an act of kindness to a stranger.

If I had only had myself to think of, I believe I should have provoked an explanation on the spot. But I had Eustace to think of. I was entirely ignorant of the relations, hostile or friendly, which existed between his mother and himself. What could I do?

In the meantime the old lady was still speaking to me with the most considerate sympathy. She too was fatigued, she said. She had passed a weary night at the bedside of a near relative staying at Ramsgate. Only the day before she had received a telegram announcing that one of her sisters was seriously ill. She was herself thank God, still active and strong, and she had thought it her duty to start at once for Ramsgate. Toward the morning the state of the patient had improved. “The doctor assures me ma’am, that there is no immediate danger; and I thought it might revive me, after my long night at the bedside, if I took a little walk on the beach.”

I heard the words—I understood what they meant—but I was still too bewildered and too intimidated by my extraordinary position to be able to continue the conversation. The landlady had a sensible suggestion to make—the landlady was the next person who spoke.

“Here is a gentleman coming,” she said to me, pointing in the direction of Ramsgate. “You can never walk back. Shall we ask him to send a chaise from Broadstairs to the gap in the cliff?”

The gentleman advanced a little nearer.

The landlady and I recognized him at the same moment.

It was Eustace coming to meet us, as we had arranged. The irrepressible landlady gave the freest expression to her feelings. “Oh, Mrs. Woodville, ain’t it lucky? here is Mr. Woodville himself.”

Once more I looked at my mother-in-law. Once more the name failed to produce the slightest effect on her. Her sight was not so keen as ours; she had not recognized her son yet. He had young eyes like us, and he recognized his mother. For a moment he stopped like a man thunderstruck. Then he came on—his ruddy face white with suppressed emotion, his eyes fixed on his mother.

“You here!” he said to her.

“How do you do, Eustace?” she quietly rejoined. “Have *you* heard of your aunt’s illness too? Did you know she was staying at Ramsgate?”

He made no answer. The landlady, drawing the inevitable inference from the words that she had just heard, looked from me to my mother-in-law in a state of amazement, which paralyzed even her tongue. I waited with my eyes on my husband, to see what he would do. If he had delayed acknowledging me another moment, the whole future course of my life might have been altered—I should have despised him.

He did *not* delay. He came to my side and took my hand.

“Do you know who this is?” he said to his mother.

She answered, looking at me with a courteous bend of her head:

“A lady I met on the beach, Eustace, who kindly restored

to me a letter that I dropped. I think I heard the name" (she turned to the landlady): "Mrs. Woodville, was it not?"

My husband's fingers unconsciously closed on my hand with a grasp that hurt me. He set his mother right, it is only just to say, without one cowardly moment of hesitation.

"Mother," he said to her, very quietly, "this lady is my wife."

She had hitherto kept her seat. She now rose slowly and faced her son in silence. The first expression of surprise passed from her face. It was succeeded by the most terrible look of mingled indignation and contempt that I ever saw in a woman's eyes.

"I pity your wife," she said.

With those words and no more, lifting her hand she waved him back from her, and went on her way again, as we had first found her, alone.

IV

ON THE WAY HOME

Left by ourselves, there was a moment of silence among us. Eustace spoke first.

"Are you able to walk back?" he said to me. "Or shall we go on to Broadstairs, and return to Ramsgate by the railway?"

He put those questions as composedly, so far as his manner was concerned, as if nothing remarkable had happened. But his eyes and his lips betrayed him. They told me that he was suffering keenly in secret. The extraordinary scene that had just passed, far from depriving me of the last remains of my courage, had strung up my nerves and restored my self-possession. I must have been more or less than woman if my self-respect had not been wounded, if my curiosity had not been wrought to the highest pitch, by the extraordinary conduct of my husband's mother when Eustace presented me to her. What was the secret of her despising him, and pitying me? Where was the explanation of her incomprehensible apathy when my name was twice pronounced in her hearing? Why had she left us, as if the bare idea of remaining in our company was abhorrent to her? The foremost interest of my life was now the interest of penetrating these mysteries. Walk? I was in such a fever of expectation that I felt as if I could have walked to the world's end, if I could only keep my husband by my side, and question him on the way.

"I am quite recovered," I said. "Let us go back, as we came,

on foot."

Eustace glanced at the landlady. The landlady understood him.

"I won't intrude my company on you, sir," she said, sharply. "I have some business to do at Broadstairs, and, now I am so near, I may as well go on. Good morning, Mrs. Woodville."

She laid a marked emphasis on my name, and she added one significant look at parting, which (in the preoccupied state of my mind at that moment) I entirely failed to comprehend. There was neither time nor opportunity to ask her what she meant. With a stiff little bow, addressed to Eustace, she left us as his mother had left us taking the way to Broadstairs, and walking rapidly.

At last we were alone.

I lost no time in beginning my inquiries; I wasted no words in prefatory phrases. In the plainest terms I put the question to him:

"What does your mother's conduct mean?"

Instead of answering, he burst into a fit of laughter—loud, coarse, hard laughter, so utterly unlike any sound I had ever yet heard issue from his lips, so strangely and shockingly foreign to his character as *I* understood it, that I stood still on the sands and openly remonstrated with him.

"Eustace! you are not like yourself," I said. "You almost frighten me."

He took no notice. He seemed to be pursuing some pleasant train of thought just started in his mind.

“So like my mother!” he exclaimed, with the air of a man who felt irresistibly diverted by some humorous idea of his own. “Tell me all about it, Valeria!”

“Tell *you*!” I repeated. “After what has happened, surely it is your duty to enlighten *me*.”

“You don’t see the joke,” he said.

“I not only fail to see the joke,” I rejoined, “I see something in your mother’s language and your mother’s behavior which justifies me in asking you for a serious explanation.”

“My dear Valeria, if you understood my mother as well as I do, a serious explanation of her conduct would be the last thing in the world that you would expect from me. The idea of taking my mother seriously!” He burst out laughing again. “My darling, you don’t know how you amuse me.”

It was all forced: it was all unnatural. He, the most delicate, the most refined of men—a gentleman in the highest sense of the word—was coarse and loud and vulgar! My heart sank under a sudden sense of misgiving which, with all my love for him, it was impossible to resist. In unutterable distress and alarm I asked myself, “Is my husband beginning to deceive me? is he acting a part, and acting it badly, before we have been married a week?” I set myself to win his confidence in a new way. He was evidently determined to force his own point of view on me. I determined, on my side, to accept his point of view.

“You tell me I don’t understand your mother,” I said, gently. “Will you help me to understand her?”

“It is not easy to help you to understand a woman who

doesn't understand herself," he answered. "But I will try. The key to my poor dear mother's character is, in one word—Eccentricity."

If he had picked out the most inappropriate word in the whole dictionary to describe the lady whom I had met on the beach, "Eccentricity" would have been that word. A child who had seen what I saw, who had heard what I heard would have discovered that he was trifling—grossly, recklessly trifling—with the truth.

"Bear in mind what I have said," he proceeded; "and if you want to understand my mother, do what I asked you to do a minute since—tell me all about it. How came you to speak to her, to begin with?"

"Your mother told you, Eustace. I was walking just behind her, when she dropped a letter by accident—"

"No accident," he interposed. "The letter was dropped on purpose."

"Impossible!" I exclaimed. "Why should your mother drop the letter on purpose?"

"Use the key to her character, my dear. Eccentricity! My mother's odd way of making acquaintance with you."

"Making acquaintance with me? I have just told you that I was walking behind her. She could not have known of the existence of such a person as myself until I spoke to her first."

"So you suppose, Valeria."

"I am certain of it."

"Pardon me—you don't know my mother as I do."

I began to lose all patience with him.

“Do you mean to tell me,” I said, “that your mother was out on the sands today for the express purpose of making acquaintance with Me?”

“I have not the slightest doubt of it,” he answered, coolly.

“Why, she didn’t even recognize my name!” I burst out. “Twice over the landlady called me Mrs. Woodville in your mother’s hearing, and twice over, I declare to you on my word of honor, it failed to produce the slightest impression on her. She looked and acted as if she had never heard her own name before in her life.”

“ ‘Acted’ is the right word,” he said, just as composedly as before. “The women on the stage are not the only women who can act. My mother’s object was to make herself thoroughly acquainted with you, and to throw you off your guard by speaking in the character of a stranger. It is exactly like her to take that roundabout way of satisfying her curiosity about a daughter-in-law she disapproves of. If I had not joined you when I did, you would have been examined and cross-examined about yourself and about me, and you would innocently have answered under the impression that you were speaking to a chance acquaintance. There is my mother all over! She is your enemy, remember—not your friend. She is not in search of your merits, but of your faults. And you wonder why no impression was produced on her when she heard you addressed by your name! Poor innocent! I can tell you this—you only discovered my mother in her own character when I put an end to the mystification by presenting you to each other. You saw how angry she was, and now you know

why."

I let him go on without saying a word. I listened—oh! with such a heavy heart, with such a crushing sense of disenchantment and despair! The idol of my worship, the companion, guide, protector of my life—had he fallen so low? could he stoop to such shameless prevarication as this?

Was there one word of truth in all that he had said to me? Yes! If I had not discovered his mother's portrait, it was certainly true that I should not have known, not even have vaguely suspected, who she really was. Apart from this, the rest was lying, clumsy lying, which said one thing at least for him, that he was not accustomed to falsehood and deceit. Good Heavens! if my husband was to be believed, his mother must have tracked us to London, tracked us to the church, tracked us to the railway station, tracked us to Ramsgate! To assert that she knew me by sight as the wife of Eustace, and that she had waited on the sands and dropped her letter for the express purpose of making acquaintance with me, was also to assert every one of these monstrous probabilities to be facts that had actually happened!

I could say no more. I walked by his side in silence, feeling the miserable conviction that there was an abyss in the shape of a family secret between my husband and me. In the spirit, if not in the body, we were separated, after a married life of barely four days.

"Valeria," he asked, "have you nothing to say to me?"

"Nothing."

"Are you not satisfied with my explanation?"

I detected a slight tremor in his voice as he put that question. The tone was, for the first time since we had spoken together, a tone that my experience associated with him in certain moods of his which I had already learned to know well. Among the hundred thousand mysterious influences which a man exercises over a woman who loves him, I doubt if there is any more irresistible to her than the influence of his voice. I am not one of those women who shed tears on the smallest provocation: it is not in my temperament, I suppose. But when I heard that little natural change in his tone my mind went back (I can't say why) to the happy day when I first owned that I loved him. I burst out crying.

He suddenly stood still, and took me by the hand. He tried to look at me.

I kept my head down and my eyes on the ground. I was ashamed of my weakness and my want of spirit. I was determined not to look at him.

In the silence that followed he suddenly dropped on his knees at my feet, with a cry of despair that cut through me like a knife.

"Valeria! I am vile—I am false—I am unworthy of you. Don't believe a word of what I have been saying—lies, lies, cowardly, contemptible lies! You don't know what I have gone through; you don't know how I have been tortured. Oh, my darling, try not to despise me! I must have been beside myself when I spoke to you as I did. You looked hurt; you looked offended; I didn't know what to do. I wanted to spare you even a moment's pain—I wanted to hush it up, and have

done with it. For God's sake don't ask me to tell you any more! My love! my angel! it's something between my mother and me; it's nothing that need disturb you; it's nothing to anybody now. I love you, I adore you; my whole heart and soul are yours. Be satisfied with that. Forget what has happened. You shall never see my mother again. We will leave this place tomorrow. We will go away in the yacht. Does it matter where we live, so long as we live for each other? Forgive and forget! Oh, Valeria, Valeria, forgive and forget!"

Unutterable misery was in his face; unutterable misery was in his voice. Remember this. And remember that I loved him.

"It is easy to forgive," I said, sadly. "For your sake, Eustace, I will try to forget."

I raised him gently as I spoke. He kissed my hands with the air of a man who was too humble to venture on any more familiar expression of his gratitude than that. The sense of embarrassment between us as we slowly walked on again was so unendurable that I actually cast about in my mind for a subject of conversation, as if I had been in the company of a stranger! In mercy to *him*, I asked him to tell me about the yacht.

He seized on the subject as a drowning man seizes on the hand that rescues him.

On that one poor little topic of the yacht he talked, talked, talked, as if his life depended upon his not being silent for an instant on the rest of the way back. To me it was dreadful to hear him. I could estimate what he was suffering by the violence which he—ordinarily a silent and thoughtful

man—was now doing to his true nature, and to the prejudices and habits of his life. With the greatest difficulty I preserved my self-control until we reached the door of our lodgings. There I was obliged to plead fatigue, and ask him to let me rest for a little while in the solitude of my own room.

"Shall we sail tomorrow?" he called after me suddenly, as I ascended the stairs.

Sail with him to the Mediterranean the next day? Pass weeks and weeks absolutely alone with him, in the narrow limits of a vessel, with his horrible secret parting us in sympathy further and further from each other day by day? I shuddered at the thought of it.

"Tomorrow is rather a short notice," I said. "Will you give me a little longer time to prepare for the voyage?"

"Oh yes—take any time you like," he answered, not (as I thought) very willingly. "While you are resting—there are still one or two little things to be settled—I think I will go back to the yacht. Is there anything I can do for you, Valeria, before I go?"

"Nothing—thank you, Eustace."

He hastened away to the harbor. Was he afraid of his own thoughts, if he were left by himself in the house. Was the company of the sailing-master and the steward better than no company at all?

It was useless to ask. What did I know about him or his thoughts? I locked myself into my room.

V

THE LANDLADY'S DISCOVERY

I sat down, and tried to compose my spirits. Now or never was the time to decide what it was my duty to my husband and my duty to myself to do next.

The effort was beyond me. Worn out in mind and body alike, I was perfectly incapable of pursuing any regular train of thought. I vaguely felt—if I left things as they were—that I could never hope to remove the shadow which now rested on the married life that had begun so brightly. We might live together, so as to save appearances. But to forget what had happened, or to feel satisfied with my position, was beyond the power of my will. My tranquillity as a woman—perhaps my dearest interests as a wife—depended absolutely on penetrating the mystery of my mother-in-law's conduct, and on discovering the true meaning of the wild words of penitence and self-reproach which my husband had addressed to me on our way home.

So far I could advance toward realizing my position—and no further. When I asked myself what was to be done next, hopeless confusion, maddening doubt, filled my mind, and transformed me into the most listless and helpless of living women.

I gave up the struggle. In dull, stupid, obstinate despair, I threw myself on my bed, and fell from sheer fatigue into a broken, uneasy sleep.

I was awakened by a knock at the door of my room.

Was it my husband? I started to my feet as the idea occurred to me. Was some new trial of my patience and my fortitude at hand? Half nervously, half irritably, I asked who was there.

The landlady's voice answered me.

"Can I speak to you for a moment, if you please?"

I opened the door. There is no disguising it—though I loved him so dearly, though I had left home and friends for his sake—it was a relief to me, at that miserable time, to know that Eustace had not returned to the house.

The landlady came in, and took a seat, without waiting to be invited, close by my side. She was no longer satisfied with merely asserting herself as my equal. Ascending another step on the social ladder, she took her stand on the platform of patronage, and charitably looked down on me as an object of pity.

"I have just returned from Broadstairs," she began. "I hope you will do me the justice to believe that I sincerely regret what has happened."

I bowed, and said nothing.

"As a gentlewoman myself," proceeded the landlady—"reduced by family misfortunes to let lodgings, but still a gentlewoman—I feel sincere sympathy with you. I will even go further than that. I will take it on myself to say that I don't blame *you*. No, no. I noticed that you were as much shocked and surprised at your mother-in-law's conduct as I was; and that is saying a great deal—a great deal indeed. However, I have a duty to perform. It is disagreeable, but it is not the less a duty on that account. I am a single woman;

not from want of opportunities of changing my condition—I beg you will understand that—but from choice. Situated as I am, I receive only the most respectable persons into my house. There must be no mystery about the positions of *my* lodgers. Mystery in the position of a lodger carries with it—what shall I say? I don't wish to offend you—I will say, a certain taint. Very well. Now I put it to your own common-sense. Can a person in my position be expected to expose herself to—taint? I make these remarks in a sisterly and Christian spirit. As a lady yourself—I will even go the length of saying a cruelly used lady—you will, I am sure, understand—"

I could endure it no longer. I stopped her there.

"I understand," I said, "that you wish to give us notice to quit your lodgings. When do you want us to go?"

The landlady held up a long, lean, red hand, in a sorrowful and sisterly protest.

"No," she said. "Not that tone; not those looks. It's natural you should be annoyed; it's natural you should be angry. But do—now do please try and control yourself. I put it to your own common-sense (we will say a week for the notice to quit)—why not treat me like a friend? You don't know what a sacrifice, what a cruel sacrifice, I have made—entirely for your sake.

"You?" I exclaimed. "What sacrifice?"

"What sacrifice?" repeated the landlady. "I have degraded myself as a gentlewoman. I have forfeited my own self-respect." She paused for a moment, and suddenly seized my hand in a perfect frenzy of friendship. "Oh, my poor dear!"

cried this intolerable person. “I have discovered everything. A villain has deceived you. You are no more married than I am!”

I snatched my hand out of hers, and rose angrily from my chair.

“Are you mad?” I asked.

The landlady raised her eyes to the ceiling with the air of a person who had deserved martyrdom, and who submitted to it cheerfully.

“Yes,” she said. “I begin to think I *am* mad—mad to have devoted myself to an ungrateful woman, to a person who doesn’t appreciate a sisterly and Christian sacrifice of self. Well, I won’t do it again. Heaven forgive me—I won’t do it again!”

“Do what again?” I asked.

“Follow your mother-in-law,” cried the landlady, suddenly dropping the character of a martyr, and assuming the character of a vixen in its place. “I blush when I think of it. I followed that most respectable person every step of the way to her own door.”

Thus far my pride had held me up. It sustained me no longer. I dropped back again into my chair, in undisguised dread of what was coming next.

“I gave you a look when I left you on the beach,” pursued the landlady, growing louder and louder and redder and redder as she went on. “A grateful woman would have understood that look. Never mind! I won’t do it again I overtook your mother-in-law at the gap in the cliff. I

followed her—oh, how I feel the disgrace of it *now*!—I followed her to the station at Broadstairs. She went back by train to Ramsgate. *I* went back by train to Ramsgate. She walked to her lodgings. *I* walked to her lodgings. Behind her. Like a dog. Oh, the disgrace of it! Providentially, as I then thought—I don't know what to think of it now—the landlord of the house happened to be a friend of mine, and happened to be at home. We have no secrets from each other where lodgers are concerned. I am in a position to tell you, madam, what your mother-in-law's name really is. She knows nothing about any such person as Mrs. Woodville, for an excellent reason. Her name is *not* Woodville. Her name (and consequently her son's name) is Macallan—Mrs. Macallan, widow of the late General Macallan. Yes! your husband is *not* your husband. You are neither maid, wife, nor widow. You are worse than nothing, madam, and you leave my house!"

I stopped her as she opened the door to go out. She had roused *my* temper by this time. The doubt that she had cast on my marriage was more than mortal resignation could endure.

"Give me Mrs. Macallan's address," I said.

The landlady's anger receded into the background, and the landlady's astonishment appeared in its place.

"You don't mean to tell me you are going to the old lady herself?" she said.

"Nobody but the old lady can tell me what I want to know," I answered. "Your discovery (as you call it) may be enough for *you*; it is not enough for *me*. How do we know that Mrs. Macallan may not have been twice married? and

that her first husband's name may not have been Woodville?"

The landlady's astonishment subsided in its turn, and the landlady's curiosity succeeded as the ruling influence of the moment. Substantially, as I have already said of her, she was a good-natured woman. Her fits of temper (as is usual with good-natured people) were of the hot and the short-lived sort, easily roused and easily appeased.

"I never thought of that," she said. "Look here! if I give you the address, will you promise to tell me all about it when you come back?"

I gave the required promise, and received the address in return.

"No malice," said the landlady, suddenly resuming all her old familiarity with me.

"No malice," I answered, with all possible cordiality on my side.

In ten minutes more I was at my mother-in-law's lodgings.

VI

MY OWN DISCOVERY

Fortunately for me, the landlord did not open the door when I rang. A stupid maid-of-all-work, who never thought of asking me for my name, let me in. Mrs. Macallan was at home, and had no visitors with her. Giving me this information, the maid led the way upstairs, and showed me into the drawing-room without a word of announcement.

My mother-in-law was sitting alone, near a worktable, knitting. The moment I appeared in the doorway she laid aside her work, and, rising, signed to me with a commanding gesture of her hand to let her speak first.

"I know what you have come here for," she said. "You have come here to ask questions. Spare yourself, and spare me. I warn you beforehand that I will not answer any questions relating to my son."

It was firmly, but not harshly said. I spoke firmly in my turn.

"I have not come here, madam, to ask questions about your son," I answered. "I have come, if you will excuse me, to ask you a question about yourself."

She started, and looked at me keenly over her spectacles. I had evidently taken her by surprise.

"What is the question?" she inquired.

"I now know for the first time, madam, that your name is Macallan," I said. "Your son has married me under the name