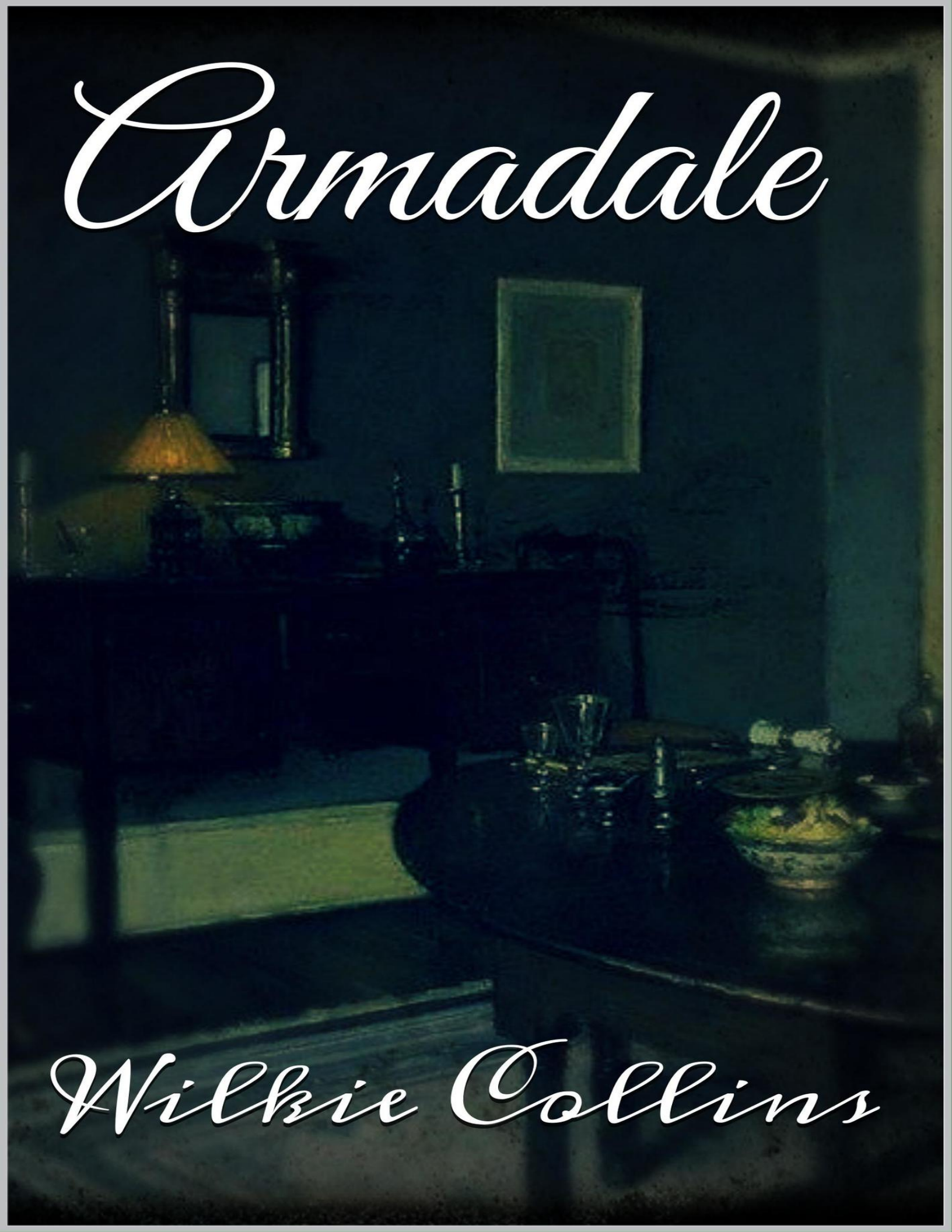
Armadale



Wilkie Collins

Armadale

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PROLOGUE.

I. THE TRAVELERS.

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

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

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

day of the season?"
"Madame Mayoress," replied the landlord (returning the compliment), "I have two. They have written—the one by the hand of his servant, the other by his own hand apparently—to order their rooms; and they are from England, both, as I think by their names. If you ask me to pronounce those names, my tongue hesitates; if you ask me to spell them, here they are, letter by letter, first and second in their order as they come. First, a high-born stranger (by title Mister) who introduces himself in eight letters, A, r, m, a, d, a, l, e—and comes ill in his own carriage. Second, a high-born stranger (by title Mister also), who introduces himself in four letters—N, e, a, l—and comes ill in the diligence. His excellency of the eight letters writes to me (by his servant) in French; his excellency of the four letters writes to me in German. The rooms of both are ready. I know no more."
"Perhaps," suggested the mayor's wife, "Mr. Doctor has heard from one or both of these illustrious strangers?"
"From one only, Madam Mayoress; but not, strictly speaking, from the person himself. I have received a medical report of his excellency of the eight letters, and his case seems a bad one. God help him!"
"The diligence!" cried a child from the outskirts of the crowd.
The musicians seized their instruments, and silence fell on the whole community. From far away in the windings of the forest gorge, the ring of horses' bells came faintly clear through the evening stillness. Which carriage was approaching—the private carriage with Mr. Armadale, or the public carriage with Mr. Neal?
"Play, my friends!" cried the mayor to the musicians. "Public or private, here are the first sick people of the season. Let them find us cheerful."
The band played a lively dance tune, and the children in the square footed it merrily to the music. At the same moment,

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

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

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

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

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

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

By this time the coming vehicle was in sight, and all further doubt was at an end. It was the diligence that now approached by the long street leading into the square—the diligence (in a dazzling new coat of yellow paint) that delivered the first visitors of the season at the inn door. Of the ten travelers released from the middle compartment

and the back compartment of the carriage—all from various parts of Germany—three were lifted out helpless, and were placed in the chairs on wheels to be drawn to their lodgings in the town. The front compartment contained two passengers only—Mr. Neal and his traveling servant. With an arm on either side to assist him, the stranger (whose malady appeared to be locally confined to a lameness in one of his feet) succeeded in descending the steps of the carriage easily enough. While he steadied himself on the pavement by the help of his stick—looking not over-patiently toward the musicians who were serenading him with the waltz in "Der Freischutz"—his personal appearance rather damped the enthusiasm of the friendly little circle assembled to welcome him. He was a lean, tall, serious, middle-aged man, with a cold gray eye and a long upper lip, with overhanging eyebrows and high cheek-bones; a man who looked what he was—every inch a Scotchman.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The hour of waiting wore out, and the figure of the doctor, walking backward and forward anxiously, was still the only living figure left in the square. Five minutes, ten minutes,

twenty minutes, were counted out by the doctor's watch, before the first sound came through the night silence to warn him of the approaching carriage. Slowly it emerged into the square, at the walking pace of the horses, and drew up, as a hearse might have drawn up, at the door of the inn.

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

"I am here, madam," replied the doctor, taking a light from the landlord's hand and opening the carriage door.

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

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

attentively by way of his hands and arms, questioned upward and upward to the muscles round his mouth, and Death-in-Life answered, *I am coming* .

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

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

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

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

"My desk?"

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

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

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

II. THE SOLID SIDE OF THE SCOTCH CHARACTER.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mr. Neal's malady, however serious it might be in his own

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

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

"May I ask what compels you?"

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

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

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

"I will not abuse your kindness," replied the doctor, resuming his chair. "I will be as short as I can. Mr. Armadale's case is briefly this: He has passed the greater part of his life in the West Indies—a wild life, and a vicious life, by his own confession. Shortly after his marriage—now some three years since—the first symptoms of an approaching paralytic affection began to show themselves, and his medical advisers ordered him away to try the climate of Europe. Since leaving the West Indies he has lived principally in Italy, with no benefit to his health. From Italy, before the last seizure attacked him, he removed to Switzerland, and from Switzerland he has been sent to this place. So much I know from his doctor's report; the rest I can tell you from my own personal experience. Mr. Armadale has been sent to Wildbad too late: he is virtually a dead man. The paralysis is fast spreading upward, and disease of the lower part of the spine has already taken place. He can still move his hands a little, but he can hold

nothing in his fingers. He can still articulate, but he may wake speechless to-morrow or next day. If I give him a week more to live, I give him what I honestly believe to be the utmost length of his span. At his own request I told him, as carefully and as tenderly as I could, what I have just told you. The result was very distressing; the violence of the patient's agitation was a violence which I despair of describing to you. I took the liberty of asking him whether his affairs were unsettled. Nothing of the sort. His will is in the hands of his executor in London, and he leaves his wife and child well provided for. My next question succeeded better; it hit the mark: 'Have you something on your mind to do before you die which is not done yet?' He gave a great gasp of relief, which said, as no words could have said it, Yes. 'Can I help you?' 'Yes. I have something to write that I *must* write; can you make me hold a pen?'

"He might as well have asked me if I could perform a miracle. I could only say No. 'If I dictate the words,' he went on, 'can you write what I tell you to write?' Once more I could only say No I understand a little English, but I can neither speak it nor write it. Mr. Armadale understands French when it is spoken (as I speak it to him) slowly, but he cannot express himself in that language; and of German he is totally ignorant. In this difficulty, I said, what any one else in my situation would have said: 'Why ask *me* ? there is Mrs. Armadale at your service in the next room.' Before I could get up from my chair to fetch her, he stopped me—not by words, but by a look of horror which fixed me, by main force of astonishment, in my place. 'Surely,' I said, 'your wife is the fittest person to write for you as you desire?' 'The last person under heaven!' he answered. 'What!' I said, 'you ask me, a foreigner and a stranger, to write words at your dictation which you keep a secret from your wife!' Conceive my astonishment when he answered me, without a moment's hesitation, 'Yes!' I sat lost; I sat silent. 'If *you* can't write English,' he said, 'find somebody

who can.' I tried to remonstrate. He burst into a dreadful moaning cry—a dumb entreaty, like the entreaty of a dog. 'Hush! hush!' I said, 'I will find somebody.' 'To-day!' he broke out, 'before my speech fails me, like my hand.' 'To-day, in an hour's time.' He shut his eyes; he quieted himself instantly. 'While I am waiting for you,' he said, 'let me see my little boy.' He had shown no tenderness when he spoke of his wife, but I saw the tears on his cheeks when he asked for his child. My profession, sir, has not made me so hard a man as you might think; and my doctor's heart was as heavy, when I went out to fetch the child, as if I had not been a doctor at all. I am afraid you think this rather weak on my part?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Excuse me," said the impenetrable Scotchman. "I beg to

suggest that you are losing the thread of the narrative."
"Nothing more likely," returned the doctor, recovering his good humor. "It is in the habit of my nation to be perpetually losing the thread; and it is evidently in the habit of yours, sir, to be perpetually finding it. What an example here of the order of the universe, and the everlasting fitness of things!"
"Will you oblige me, once for all, by confining yourself to the facts," persisted Mr. Neal, frowning impatiently. "May I inquire, for my own information, whether Mrs. Armadale could tell you what it is her husband wishes me to write, and why it is that he refuses to let her write for him?"
"There is my thread found—and thank you for finding it!" said the doctor. "You shall hear what Mrs. Armadale had to tell me, in Mrs. Armadale's own words. 'The cause that now shuts me out of his confidence,' she said, 'is, I firmly believe, the same cause that has always shut me out of his heart. I am the wife he has wedded, but I am not the woman he loves. I knew when he married me that another man had won from him the woman he loved. I thought I could make him forget her. I hoped when I married him; I hoped again when I bore him a son. Need I tell you the end of my hopes—you have seen it for yourself.' (Wait, sir, I entreat you! I have not lost the thread again; I am following it inch by inch.) 'Is this all you know?' I asked. 'All I knew,' she said, 'till a short time since. It was when we were in Switzerland, and when his illness was nearly at its worst, that news came to him by accident of that other woman who has been the shadow and the poison of my life—news that she (like me) had borne her husband a son. On the instant of his making that discovery—a trifling discovery, if ever there was one yet—a mortal fear seized on him: not for me, not for himself; a fear for his own child. The same day (without a word to me) he sent for the doctor. I was mean, wicked, what you please—I listened at the door. I heard him say: *I have something to tell my son, when my*

son grows old enough to understand me. Shall I live to tell it ? The doctor would say nothing certain. The same night (still without a word to me) he locked himself into his room. What would any woman, treated as I was, have done in my place? She would have done as I did—she would have listened again. I heard him say to himself: *I shall not live to tell it: I must; write it before I die* . I heard his pen scrape, scrape, scrape over the paper; I heard him groaning and sobbing as he wrote; I implored him for God's sake to let me in. The cruel pen went scrape, scrape, scrape; the cruel pen was all the answer he gave me. I waited at the door—hours—I don't know how long. On a sudden, the pen stopped; and I heard no more. I whispered through the keyhole softly; I said I was cold and weary with waiting; I said, Oh, my love, let me in! Not even the cruel pen answered me now: silence answered me. With all the strength of my miserable hands I beat at the door. The servants came up and broke it in. We were too late; the harm was done. Over that fatal letter, the stroke had struck him—over that fatal letter, we found him paralyzed as you see him now. Those words which he wants you to write are the words he would have written himself if the stroke had spared him till the morning. From that time to this there has been a blank place left in the letter; and it is that blank place which he has just asked you to fill up.'—In those words Mrs. Armadale spoke to me; in those words you have the sum and substance of all the information I can give. Say, if you please, sir, have I kept the thread at last? Have I shown you the necessity which brings me here from your countryman's death-bed?"

"Thus far," said Mr. Neal, "you merely show me that you are exciting yourself. This is too serious a matter to be treated as you are treating it now. You have involved Me in the business, and I insist on seeing my way plainly. Don't raise your hands; your hands are not a part of the question. If I am to be concerned in the completion of this mysterious

letter, it is only an act of justifiable prudence on my part to inquire what the letter is about. Mrs. Armadale appears to have favored you with an infinite number of domestic particulars—in return, I presume, for your polite attention in taking her by the hand. May I ask what she could tell you about her husband's letter, so far as her husband has written it?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Wait a little!" he said. "You put it strongly; let us be quite

sure you put it correctly as well. Let us be quite sure there is nobody to take this responsibility but myself. There is a mayor in Wildbad, to begin with—a man who possesses an official character to justify his interference."
"A man of a thousand," said the doctor. "With one fault—he knows no language but his own."
"There is an English legation at Stuttgart," persisted Mr. Neal.
"And there are miles on miles of the forest between this and Stuttgart," rejoined the doctor. "If we sent this moment, we could get no help from the legation before to-morrow; and it is as likely as not, in the state of this dying man's articulation, that to-morrow may find him speechless. I don't know whether his last wishes are wishes harmless to his child and to others, wishes hurtful to his child and to others; but I *do* know that they must be fulfilled at once or never, and that you are the only man that can help him."
That open declaration brought the discussion to a close. It fixed Mr. Neal fast between the two alternatives of saying Yes, and committing an act of imprudence, or of saying No, and committing an act of inhumanity. There was a silence of some minutes. The Scotchman steadily reflected; and the German steadily watched him.
The responsibility of saying the next words rested on Mr. Neal, and in course of time Mr. Neal took it. He rose from his chair with a sullen sense of injury lowering on his heavy eyebrows, and working sourly in the lines at the corners of his mouth.
"My position is forced on me," he said. "I have no choice but to accept it."
The doctor's impulsive nature rose in revolt against the merciless brevity and gracelessness of that reply. "I wish to God," he broke out fervently, "I knew English enough to take your place at Mr. Armadale's bedside!"
"Bating your taking the name of the Almighty in vain," answered the Scotchman, "I entirely agree with you. I wish

you did."
Without another word on either side, they left the room together—the doctor leading the way.

III. THE WRECK OF THE TIMBER SHIP.

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was midday; the sun shone bright and warm; and all the little world of Wildbad was alive and merry in the genial springtime. Now and again heavy wagons, with black-faced carters in charge, rolled by the window, bearing their

precious lading of charcoal from the forest. Now and again, hurled over the headlong current of the stream that runs through the town, great lengths of timber, loosely strung together in interminable series—with the booted raftsmen, pole in hand, poised watchful at either end—shot swift and serpent-like past the houses on their course to the distant Rhine. High and steep above the gabled wooden buildings on the river-bank, the great hillsides, crested black with firs, shone to the shining heavens in a glory of lustrous green. In and out, where the forest foot-paths wound from the grass through the trees, from the trees over the grass, the bright spring dresses of women and children, on the search for wild flowers, traveled to and fro in the lofty distance like spots of moving light. Below, on the walk by the stream side, the booths of the little bazar that had opened punctually with the opening season showed all their glittering trinkets, and fluttered in the balmy air their splendor of many-colored flags. Longingly, here the children looked at the show; patiently the sunburned lasses plied their knitting as they paced the walk; courteously the passing townspeople, by fours and fives, and the passing visitors, by ones and twos, greeted each other, hat in hand; and slowly, slowly, the cripple and the helpless in their chairs on wheels came out in the cheerful noontide with the rest, and took their share of the blessed light that cheers, of the blessed sun that shines for all.

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

"Mrs. Armadale is here," said the doctor's voice, interposing suddenly between his reflections and himself. He turned on the instant, and saw before him, with the pure midday light shining full on her, a woman of the mixed

blood of the European and the African race, with the Northern delicacy in the shape of her face, and the Southern richness in its color—a woman in the prime of her beauty, who moved with an inbred grace, who looked with an inbred fascination, whose large, languid black eyes rested on him gratefully, whose little dusky hand offered itself to him in mute expression of her thanks, with the welcome that is given to the coming of a friend. For the first time in his life the Scotchman was taken by surprise. Every self-preservative word that he had been meditating but an instant since dropped out of his memory. His thrice impenetrable armor of habitual suspicion, habitual self-discipline, and habitual reserve, which had never fallen from him in a woman's presence before, fell from him in this woman's presence, and brought him to his knees, a conquered man. He took the hand she offered him, and bowed over it his first honest homage to the sex, in silence.
She hesitated on her side. The quick feminine perception which, in happier circumstances, would have pounced on the secret of his embarrassment in an instant, failed her now. She attributed his strange reception of her to pride, to reluctance—to any cause but the unexpected revelation of her own beauty. "I have no words to thank you," she said, faintly, trying to propitiate him. "I should only distress you if I tried to speak." Her lip began to tremble, she drew back a little, and turned away her head in silence.
The doctor, who had been standing apart, quietly observant in a corner, advanced before Mr. Neal could interfere, and led Mrs. Armadale to a chair. "Don't be afraid of him," whispered the good man, patting her gently on the shoulder. "He was hard as iron in my hands, but I think, by the look of him, he will be soft as wax in yours. Say the words I told you to say, and let us take him to your husband's room, before those sharp wits of his have time to recover themselves."
She roused her sinking resolution, and advanced half-way

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

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

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

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

a new toy. When the door opened, and Mrs. Armadale led the way in, the boy was tossing his plaything—a soldier on horseback—backward and forward over the helpless hands on either side of him; and the father's wandering eyes were following the toy to and fro, with a stealthy and ceaseless vigilance—a vigilance as of a wild animal, terrible to see. The moment Mr. Neal appeared in the doorway, those restless eyes stopped, looked up, and fastened on the stranger with a fierce eagerness of inquiry. Slowly the motionless lips struggled into movement. With thick, hesitating articulation, they put the question which the eyes asked mutely, into words: "Are you the man?"

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

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

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

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

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

speech is going. Write!"
Before there was time to speak again, Mr. Neal heard the rustling of a woman's dress, and the quick creaking of casters on the carpet behind him. Mrs. Armadale was moving the writing-table across the room to the foot of the bed. If he was to set up those safeguards of his own devising that were to bear him harmless through all results to come, now was the time, or never. He, kept his back turned on Mrs. Armadale, and put his precautionary question at once in the plainest terms.
"May I ask, sir, before I take the pen in hand, what it is you wish me to write?"
The angry eyes of the paralyzed man glittered brighter and brighter. His lips opened and closed again. He made no reply.
Mr. Neal tried another precautionary question, in a new direction.
"When I have written what you wish me to write," he asked, "what is to be done with it?"
This time the answer came:
"Seal it up in my presence, and post it to my ex—"
His laboring articulation suddenly stopped and he looked piteously in the questioner's face for the next word.
"Do you mean your executor?"
"Yes."
"It is a letter, I suppose, that I am to post?" There was no answer. "May I ask if it is a letter altering your will?"
"Nothing of the sort."
Mr. Neal considered a little. The mystery was thickening. The one way out of it, so far, was the way traced faintly through that strange story of the unfinished letter which the doctor had repeated to him in Mrs. Armadale's words. The nearer he approached his unknown responsibility, the more ominous it seemed of something serious to come. Should he risk another question before he pledged himself irrevocably? As the doubt crossed his mind, he felt Mrs.

Armadale's silk dress touch him on the side furthest from her husband. Her delicate dark hand was laid gently on his arm; her full deep African eyes looked at him in submissive entreaty. "My husband is very anxious," she whispered. "Will you quiet his anxiety, sir, by taking your place at the writing-table?"

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

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

"Do you give me your promise?"

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

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

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

breast. His mother's lovely face contracted with a pang of jealousy as she looked at him.
"Shall I open your desk?" she asked, pushing back the child's plaything sharply while she spoke. An answering look from her husband guided her hand to the place under his pillow where the key was hidden. She opened the desk, and disclosed inside some small sheets of manuscript pinned together. "These?" she inquired, producing them.
"Yes," he said. "You can go now."
The Scotchman sitting at the writing-table, the doctor stirring a stimulant mixture in a corner, looked at each other with an anxiety in both their faces which they could neither of them control. The words that banished the wife from the room were spoken. The moment had come.
"You can go now," said Mr. Armadale, for the second time.
She looked at the child, established comfortably on the bed, and an ashy paleness spread slowly over her face. She looked at the fatal letter which was a sealed secret to her, and a torture of jealous suspicion—suspicion of that other woman who had been the shadow and the poison of her life—wrung her to the heart. After moving a few steps from the bedside, she stopped, and came back again. Armed with the double courage of her love and her despair, she pressed her lips on her dying husband's cheek, and pleaded with him for the last time. Her burning tears dropped on his face as she whispered to him: "Oh, Allan, think how I have loved you! think how hard I have tried to make you happy! think how soon I shall lose you! Oh, my own love! don't, don't send me away!"
The words pleaded for her; the kiss pleaded for her; the recollection of the love that had been given to him, and never returned, touched the heart of the fast-sinking man as nothing had touched it since the day of his marriage. A heavy sigh broke from him. He looked at her, and hesitated.
"Let me stay," she whispered, pressing her face closer to his.