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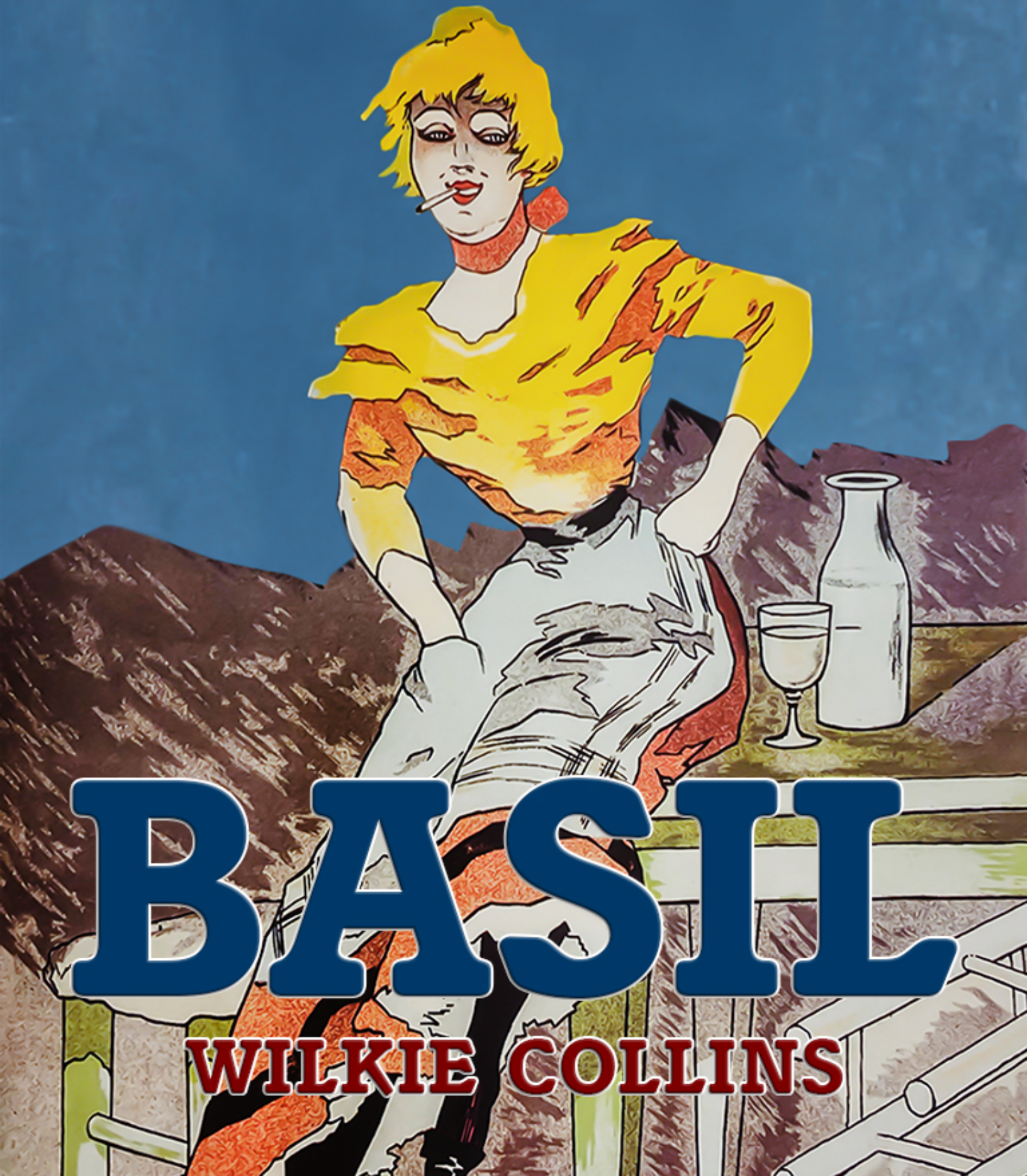

BASIL

WILKIE COLLINS

BASIL

Wilkie Collins

LETTER OF DEDICATION.

TO CHARLES JAMES WARD, ESQ.

IT has long been one of my pleasantest anticipations to look forward to the time when I might offer to you, my old and dear friend, some such acknowledgment of the value I place on your affection for me, and of my grateful sense of the many acts of kindness by which that affection has been proved, as I now gladly offer in this place. In dedicating the present work to you, I fulfil therefore a purpose which, for some time past, I have sincerely desired to achieve; and, more than that, I gain for myself the satisfaction of knowing that there is one page, at least, of my book, on which I shall always look with unalloyed pleasure—the page that bears your name.

I have founded the main event out of which this story springs, on a fact within my own knowledge. In afterwards shaping the course of the narrative thus suggested, I have guided it, as often as I could, where I knew by my own experience, or by experience related to me by others, that it would touch on something real and true in its progress. My idea was, that the more of the Actual I could garner up as a text to speak from, the more certain I might feel of the genuineness and value of the Ideal which was sure to spring out of it. Fancy and Imagination, Grace and Beauty, all those qualities which are to the work of Art what scent and colour are to the flower, can only grow towards heaven by taking root in earth. Is not the noblest poetry of prose fiction the poetry of every-day truth?

Directing my characters and my story, then, towards the light of Reality wherever I could find it, I have not hesitated to violate some of the conventionalities of sentimental

fiction. For instance, the first love-meeting of two of the personages in this book, occurs (where the real love-meeting from which it is drawn, occurred) in the very last place and under the very last circumstances which the artifices of sentimental writing would sanction. Will my lovers excite ridicule instead of interest, because I have truly represented them as seeing each other where hundreds of other lovers have first seen each other, as hundreds of people will readily admit when they read the passage to which I refer? I am sanguine enough to think not.

So again, in certain parts of this book where I have attempted to excite the suspense or pity of the reader, I have admitted as perfectly fit accessories to the scene the most ordinary street-sounds that could be heard, and the most ordinary street-events that could occur, at the time and in the place represented—believing that by adding to truth, they were adding to tragedy—adding by all the force of fair contrast—adding as no artifices of mere writing possibly could add, let them be ever so cunningly introduced by ever so crafty a hand.

Allow me to dwell a moment longer on the story which these pages contain.

Believing that the Novel and the Play are twin-sisters in the family of Fiction; that the one is a drama narrated, as the other is a drama acted; and that all the strong and deep emotions which the Play-writer is privileged to excite, the Novel-writer is privileged to excite also, I have not thought it either politic or necessary, while adhering to realities, to adhere to every-day realities only. In other words, I have not stooped so low as to assure myself of the reader’s belief in the probability of my story, by never once calling on him for the exercise of his faith. Those extraordinary accidents and events which happen to few men, seemed to me to be as legitimate materials for fiction to work with—when there was a good object in using them—as the ordinary accidents

and events which may, and do, happen to us all. By appealing to genuine sources of interest *within* the reader's own experience, I could certainly gain his attention to begin with; but it would be only by appealing to other sources (as genuine in their way) *beyond* his own experience, that I could hope to fix his interest and excite his suspense, to occupy his deeper feelings, or to stir his nobler thoughts.

In writing thus—briefly and very generally—(for I must not delay you too long from the story), I can but repeat, though I hope almost unnecessarily, that I am now only speaking of what I have tried to do. Between the purpose hinted at here, and the execution of that purpose contained in the succeeding pages, lies the broad line of separation which distinguishes between the will and the deed. How far I may fall short of another man's standard, remains to be discovered. How far I have fallen short of my own, I know painfully well.

One word more on the manner in which the purpose of the following pages is worked out—and I have done.

Nobody who admits that the business of fiction is to exhibit human life, can deny that scenes of misery and crime must of necessity, while human nature remains what it is, form part of that exhibition. Nobody can assert that such scenes are unproductive of useful results, when they are turned to a plainly and purely moral purpose. If I am asked why I have written certain scenes in this book, my answer is to be found in the universally-accepted truth which the preceding words express. I have a right to appeal to that truth; for I guided myself by it throughout. In deriving the lesson which the following pages contain, from those examples of error and crime which would most strikingly and naturally teach it, I determined to do justice to the honesty of my object by speaking out. In drawing the two characters, whose actions bring about the darker scenes of my story, I did not forget that it was my duty,

while striving to portray them naturally, to put them to a good moral use; and at some sacrifice, in certain places, of dramatic effect (though I trust with no sacrifice of truth to Nature), I have shown the conduct of the vile, as always, in a greater or less degree, associated with something that is selfish, contemptible, or cruel in motive. Whether any of my better characters may succeed in endearing themselves to the reader, I know not: but this I do certainly know:—that I shall in no instance cheat him out of his sympathies in favour of the bad.

To those persons who dissent from the broad principles here adverted to; who deny that it is the novelist’s vocation to do more than merely amuse them; who shrink from all honest and serious reference, in books, to subjects which they think of in private and talk of in public everywhere; who see covert implications where nothing is implied, and improper allusions where nothing improper is alluded to; whose innocence is in the word, and not in the thought; whose morality stops at the tongue, and never gets on to the heart—to those persons, I should consider it loss of time, and worse, to offer any further explanation of my motives, than the sufficient explanation which I have given already. I do not address myself to them in this book, and shall never think of addressing myself to them in any other.

Those words formed part of the original introduction to this novel. I wrote them nearly ten years since; and what I said then, I say now.

“Basil” was the second work of fiction which I produced. On its appearance, it was condemned off-hand, by a certain class of readers, as an outrage on their sense of propriety. Conscious of having designed and written, my story with the strictest regard to true delicacy, as distinguished from false —I allowed the prurient misinterpretation of certain perfectly innocent passages in this book to assert itself as offensively as it pleased, without troubling myself to protest

against an expression of opinion which aroused in me no other feeling than a feeling of contempt. I knew that “Basil” had nothing to fear from pure-minded readers; and I left these pages to stand or fall on such merits as they possessed. Slowly and surely, my story forced its way through all adverse criticism, to a place in the public favour which it has never lost since. Some of the most valued friends I now possess, were made for me by “Basil.” Some of the most gratifying recognitions of my labours which I have received, from readers personally strangers to me, have been recognitions of the purity of this story, from the first page to the last. All the indulgence I need now ask for “Basil,” is indulgence for literary defects, which are the result of inexperience; which no correction can wholly remove; and which no one sees more plainly, after a lapse of ten years, than the writer himself.

I have only to add, that the present edition of this book is the first which has had the benefit of my careful revision. While the incidents of the story remain exactly what they were, the language in which they are told has been, I hope, in many cases greatly altered for the better.

WILKIE COLLINS.

Harley Street, London, July, 1862.

PART I.

I.

WHAT am I now about to write?

The history of little more than the events of one year, out of the twenty-four years of my life.

Why do I undertake such an employment as this?

Perhaps, because I think that my narrative may do good; because I hope that, one day, it may be put to some warning use. I am now about to relate the story of an error, innocent in its beginning, guilty in its progress, fatal in its results; and I would fain hope that my plain and true record will show that this error was not committed altogether without excuse. When these pages are found after my death, they will perhaps be calmly read and gently judged, as relics solemnized by the atoning shadows of the grave. Then, the hard sentence against me may be repented of; the children of the next generation of our house may be taught to speak charitably of my memory, and may often, of their own accord, think of me kindly in the thoughtful watches of the night.

Prompted by these motives, and by others which I feel, but cannot analyse, I now begin my self-imposed occupation. Hidden amid the far hills of the far West of England, surrounded only by the few simple inhabitants of a fishing hamlet on the Cornish coast, there is little fear that my attention will be distracted from my task; and as little chance that any indolence on my part will delay its speedy accomplishment. I live under a threat of impending hostility, which may descend and overwhelm me, I know not how soon, or in what manner. An enemy, determined and deadly, patient alike to wait days or years for his opportunity, is

ever lurking after me in the dark. In entering on my new employment, I cannot say of my time, that it may be mine for another hour; of my life, that it may last till evening.

Thus it is as no leisure work that I begin my narrative—and begin it, too, on my birthday! On this day I complete my twenty-fourth year; the first new year of my life which has not been greeted by a single kind word, or a single loving wish. But one look of welcome can still find me in my solitude—the lovely morning look of nature, as I now see it from the casement of my room. Brighter and brighter shines out the lusty sun from banks of purple, rainy cloud; fishermen are spreading their nets to dry on the lower declivities of the rocks; children are playing round the boats drawn up on the beach; the sea-breeze blows fresh and pure towards the shore——all objects are brilliant to look on, all sounds are pleasant to hear, as my pen traces the first lines which open the story of my life.

II.

I am the second son of an English gentleman of large fortune. Our family is, I believe, one of the most ancient in this country. On my father’s side, it dates back beyond the Conquest; on my mother’s, it is not so old, but the pedigree is nobler. Besides my elder brother, I have one sister, younger than myself. My mother died shortly after giving birth to her last child.

Circumstances which will appear hereafter, have forced me to abandon my father’s name. I have been obliged in honour to resign it; and in honour I abstain from mentioning it here. Accordingly, at the head of these pages, I have only placed my Christian name—not considering it of any importance to add the surname which I have assumed; and which I may, perhaps, be obliged to change for some other, at no very distant period. It will now, I hope, be understood from the outset, why I never mention my brother and sister but by their Christian names; why a blank occurs wherever

my father’s name should appear; why my own is kept concealed in this narrative, as it is kept concealed in the world.

The story of my boyhood and youth has little to interest—nothing that is new. My education was the education of hundreds of others in my rank of life. I was first taught at a public school, and then went to college to complete what is termed “a liberal education.”

My life at college has not left me a single pleasant recollection. I found sycophancy established there, as a principle of action; flaunting on the lord’s gold tassel in the street; enthroned on the lord’s dais in the dining-room. The most learned student in my college—the man whose life was most exemplary, whose acquirements were most admirable—was shown me sitting, as a commoner, in the lowest place. The heir to an Earldom, who had failed at the last examination, was pointed out a few minutes afterwards, dining in solitary grandeur at a raised table, above the reverend scholars who had turned him back as a dunce. I had just arrived at the University, and had just been congratulated on entering “a venerable seminary of learning and religion.”

Trite and common-place though it be, I mention this circumstance attending my introduction to college, because it formed the first cause which tended to diminish my faith in the institution to which I was attached. I soon grew to regard my university training as a sort of necessary evil, to be patiently submitted to. I read for no honours, and joined no particular set of men. I studied the literature of France, Italy, and Germany; just kept up my classical knowledge sufficiently to take my degree; and left college with no other reputation than a reputation for indolence and reserve.

When I returned home, it was thought necessary, as I was a younger son, and could inherit none of the landed property of the family, except in the case of my brother’s

dying without children, that I should belong to a profession. My father had the patronage of some valuable “livings,” and good interest with more than one member of the government. The church, the army, the navy, and, in the last instance, the bar, were offered me to choose from. I selected the last.

My father appeared to be a little astonished at my choice; but he made no remark on it, except simply telling me not to forget that the bar was a good stepping-stone to parliament. My real ambition, however, was, not to make a name in parliament, but a name in literature. I had already engaged myself in the hard, but glorious service of the pen; and I was determined to persevere. The profession which offered me the greatest facilities for pursuing my project, was the profession which I was ready to prefer. So I chose the bar.

Thus, I entered life under the fairest auspices. Though a younger son, I knew that my father’s wealth, exclusive of his landed property, secured me an independent income far beyond my wants. I had no extravagant habits; no tastes that I could not gratify as soon as formed; no cares or responsibilities of any kind. I might practise my profession or not, just as I chose. I could devote myself wholly and unreservedly to literature, knowing that, in my case, the struggle for fame could never be identical—terribly, though gloriously identical—with the struggle for bread. For me, the morning sunshine of life was sunshine without a cloud!

I might attempt, in this place, to sketch my own character as it was at that time. But what man can say—I will sound the depth of my own vices, and measure the height of my own virtues; and be as good as his word? We can neither know nor judge ourselves; others may judge, but cannot know us: God alone judges and knows too. Let my character appear—as far as any human character can appear in its integrity, in this world—in my actions, when I describe the

one eventful passage in my life which forms the basis of this narrative. In the mean time, it is first necessary that I should say more about the members of my family. Two of them, at least, will be found important to the progress of events in these pages. I make no attempt to judge their characters: I only describe them—whether rightly or wrongly, I know not—as they appeared to me.

III.

I always considered my father—I speak of him in the past tense, because we are now separated for ever; because he is henceforth as dead to me as if the grave had closed over him—I always considered my father to be the proudest man I ever knew; the proudest man I ever heard of. His was not that conventional pride, which the popular notions are fond of characterising by a stiff, stately carriage; by a rigid expression of features; by a hard, severe intonation of voice; by set speeches of contempt for poverty and rags, and rhapsodical braggadocio about rank and breeding. My father’s pride had nothing of this about it. It was that quiet, negative, courteous, inbred pride, which only the closest observation could detect; which no ordinary observers ever detected at all.

Who that observed him in communication with any of the farmers on any of his estates—who that saw the manner in which he lifted his hat, when he accidentally met any of those farmers’ wives—who that noticed his hearty welcome to the man of the people, when that man happened to be a man of genius—would have thought him proud? On such occasions as these, if he had any pride, it was impossible to detect it. But seeing him when, for instance, an author and a new-made peer of no ancestry entered his house together—observing merely the entirely different manner in which he shook hands with each—remarking that the polite cordiality was all for the man of letters, who did not contest his family rank with him, and the polite formality all for the

man of title, who did—you discovered where and how he was proud in an instant. Here lay his fretful point. The aristocracy of rank, as separate from the aristocracy of ancestry, was no aristocracy for *him.* He was jealous of it; he hated it. Commoner though he was, he considered himself the social superior of any man, from a baronet up to a duke, whose family was less ancient than his own.

Among a host of instances of this peculiar pride of his which I could cite, I remember one, characteristic enough to be taken as a sample of all the rest. It happened when I was quite a child, and was told me by one of my uncles now dead—who witnessed the circumstance himself, and always made a good story of it to the end of his life.

A merchant of enormous wealth, who had recently been raised to the peerage, was staying at one of our country houses. His daughter, my uncle, and an Italian Abbe were the only guests besides. The merchant was a portly, purple-faced man, who bore his new honours with a curious mixture of assumed pomposity and natural good-humour. The Abbe was dwarfish and deformed, lean, sallow, sharp-featured, with bright bird-like eyes, and a low, liquid voice. He was a political refugee, dependent for the bread he ate, on the money he received for teaching languages. He might have been a beggar from the streets; and still my father would have treated him as the principal guest in the house, for this all-sufficient reason—he was a direct descendant of one of the oldest of those famous Roman families whose names are part of the history of the Civil Wars in Italy.

On the first day, the party assembled for dinner comprised the merchant’s daughter, my mother, an old lady who had once been her governess, and had always lived with her since her marriage, the new Lord, the Abbe, my father, and my uncle. When dinner was announced, the peer advanced in new-blown dignity, to offer his arm as a matter of course to my mother. My father’s pale face flushed

crimson in a moment. He touched the magnificent merchant-lord on the arm, and pointed significantly, with a low bow, towards the decrepit old lady who had once been my mother’s governess. Then walking to the other end of the room, where the penniless Abbe was looking over a book in a corner, he gravely and courteously led the little, deformed, limping language-master, clad in a long, threadbare, black coat, up to my mother (whose shoulder the Abbe’s head hardly reached), held the door open for them to pass out first, with his own hand; politely invited the new nobleman, who stood half-paralysed between confusion and astonishment, to follow with the tottering old lady on his arm; and then returned to lead the peer’s daughter down to dinner himself. He only resumed his wonted expression and manner, when he had seen the little Abbe—the squalid, half-starved representative of mighty barons of the olden time—seated at the highest place of the table by my mother’s side.

It was by such accidental circumstances as these that you discovered how far he was proud. He never boasted of his ancestors; he never even spoke of them, except when he was questioned on the subject; but he never forgot them. They were the very breath of his life; the deities of his social worship: the family treasures to be held precious beyond all lands and all wealth, all ambitions and all glories, by his children and his children’s children to the end of their race.

In home-life he performed his duties towards his family honourably, delicately, and kindly. I believe in his own way he loved us all; but we, his descendants, had to share his heart with his ancestors—we were his household property as well as his children. Every fair liberty was given to us; every fair indulgence was granted to us. He never displayed any suspicion, or any undue severity. We were taught by his direction, that to disgrace our family, either by word or action, was the one fatal crime which could never be

forgotten and never be pardoned. We were formed, under his superintendence, in principles of religion, honour, and industry; and the rest was left to our own moral sense, to our own comprehension of the duties and privileges of our station. There was no one point in his conduct towards any of us that we could complain of; and yet there was something always incomplete in our domestic relations.

It may seem incomprehensible, even ridiculous, to some persons, but it is nevertheless true, that we were none of us ever on intimate terms with him. I mean by this, that he was a father to us, but never a companion. There was something in his manner, his quiet and unchanging manner, which kept us almost unconsciously restrained. I never in my life felt less at my ease—I knew not why at the time—than when I occasionally dined alone with him. I never confided to him my schemes for amusement as a boy, or mentioned more than generally my ambitious hopes, as a young man. It was not that he would have received such confidences with ridicule or severity, he was incapable of it; but that he seemed above them, unfitted to enter into them, too far removed by his own thoughts from such thoughts as ours. Thus, all holiday councils were held with old servants; thus, my first pages of manuscript, when I first tried authorship, were read by my sister, and never penetrated into my father’s study.

Again, his mode of testifying displeasure towards my brother or myself, had something terrible in its calmness, something that we never forgot, and always dreaded as the worst calamity that could befall us.

Whenever, as boys, we committed some boyish fault, he never displayed outwardly any irritation—he simply altered his manner towards us altogether. We were not soundly lectured, or vehemently threatened, or positively punished in anyway; but, when we came in contact with him, we were treated with a cold, contemptuous politeness (especially if

our fault showed a tendency to anything mean or ungentlemanlike) which cut us to the heart. On these occasions, we were not addressed by our Christian names; if we accidentally met him out of doors, he was sure to turn aside and avoid us; if we asked a question, it was answered in the briefest possible manner, as if we had been strangers. His whole course of conduct said, as though in so many words—You have rendered yourselves unfit to associate with your father; and he is now making you feel that unfitness as deeply as he does. We were left in this domestic purgatory for days, sometimes for weeks together. To our boyish feelings (to mine especially) there was no ignominy like it, while it lasted.

I know not on what terms my father lived with my mother. Towards my sister, his demeanour always exhibited something of the old-fashioned, affectionate gallantry of a former age. He paid her the same attention that he would have paid to the highest lady in the land. He led her into the dining-room, when we were alone, exactly as he would have led a duchess into a banqueting-hall. He would allow us, as boys, to quit the breakfast-table before he had risen himself; but never before she had left it. If a servant failed in duty towards *him,* the servant was often forgiven; if towards *her,* the servant was sent away on the spot. His daughter was in his eyes the representative of her mother: the mistress of his house, as well as his child. It was curious to see the mixture of high-bred courtesy and fatherly love in his manner, as he just gently touched her forehead with his lips, when he first saw her in the morning.

In person, my father was of not more than middle height. He was very slenderly and delicately made; his head small, and well set on his shoulders—his forehead more broad than lofty—his complexion singularly pale, except in moments of agitation, when I have already noticed its tendency to flush all over in an instant. His eyes, large and gray, had

something commanding in their look; they gave a certain unchanging firmness and dignity to his expression, not often met with. They betrayed his birth and breeding, his old ancestral prejudices, his chivalrous sense of honour, in every glance. It required, indeed, all the masculine energy of look about the upper part of his face, to redeem the lower part from an appearance of effeminacy, so delicately was it moulded in its fine Norman outline. His smile was remarkable for its sweetness—it was almost like a woman's smile. In speaking, too, his lips often trembled as women's do. If he ever laughed, as a young man, his laugh must have been very clear and musical; but since I can recollect him, I never heard it. In his happiest moments, in the gayest society, I have only seen him smile.

There were other characteristics of my father's disposition and manner, which I might mention; but they will appear to greater advantage, perhaps, hereafter, connected with circumstances which especially called them forth.

IV.

When a family is possessed of large landed property, the individual of that family who shows least interest in its welfare; who is least fond of home, least connected by his own sympathies with his relatives, least ready to learn his duties or admit his responsibilities, is often that very individual who is to succeed to the family inheritance—the eldest son.

My brother Ralph was no exception to this remark. We were educated together. After our education was completed, I never saw him, except for short periods. He was almost always on the continent, for some years after he left college. And when he returned definitely to England, he did not return to live under our roof. Both in town and country he was our visitor, not our inmate.

I recollect him at school—stronger, taller, handsomer than I was; far beyond me in popularity among the little community we lived with; the first to lead a daring exploit, the last to abandon it; now at the bottom of the class, now at the top—just that sort of gay, boisterous, fine-looking, dare-devil boy, whom old people would instinctively turn round and smile after, as they passed him by in a morning walk.

Then, at college, he became illustrious among rowers and cricketers, renowned as a pistol shot, dreaded as a singlestick player. No wine parties in the university were such wine parties as his; tradesmen gave him the first choice of everything that was new; young ladies in the town fell in love with him by dozens; young tutors with a tendency to dandyism, copied the cut of his coat and the tie of his cravat; even the awful heads of houses looked leniently on his delinquencies. The gay, hearty, handsome young English gentleman carried a charm about him that subdued everybody. Though I was his favourite butt, both at school and college, I never quarrelled with him in my life. I always let him ridicule my dress, manners, and habits in his own reckless, boisterous way, as if it had been a part of his birthright privilege to laugh at me as much as he chose.

Thus far, my father had no worse anxieties about him than those occasioned by his high spirits and his heavy debts. But when he returned home—when the debts had been paid, and it was next thought necessary to drill the free, careless energies into something like useful discipline—then my father’s trials and difficulties began in earnest.

It was impossible to make Ralph comprehend and appreciate his position, as he was desired to comprehend and appreciate it. The steward gave up in despair all attempts to enlighten him about the extent, value, and management of the estates he was to inherit. A vigorous effort was made to inspire him with ambition; to get him to

go into parliament. He laughed at the idea. A commission in the Guards was next offered to him. He refused it, because he would never be buttoned up in a red coat; because he would submit to no restraints, fashionable or military; because in short, he was determined to be his own master. My father talked to him by the hour together, about his duties and his prospects, the cultivation of his mind, and the example of his ancestors; and talked in vain. He yawned and fidgetted over the emblazoned pages of his own family pedigree, whenever they were opened before him.

In the country, he cared for nothing but hunting and shooting—it was as difficult to make him go to a grand county dinner-party, as to make him go to church. In town, he haunted the theatres, behind the scenes as well as before; entertained actors and actresses at Richmond; ascended in balloons at Vauxhall; went about with detective policemen, seeing life among pickpockets and housebreakers; belonged to a whist club, a supper club, a catch club, a boxing club, a picnic club, an amateur theatrical club; and, in short, lived such a careless, convivial life, that my father, outraged in every one of his family prejudices and family refinements, almost ceased to speak to him, and saw him as rarely as possible. Occasionally, my sister’s interference reconciled them again for a short time; her influence, gentle as it was, was always powerfully felt for good, but she could not change my brother’s nature. Persuade and entreat as anxiously as she might, he was always sure to forfeit the paternal favour again, a few days after he had been restored to it.

At last, matters were brought to their climax by an awkward love adventure of Ralph’s with one of our tenants’ daughters. My father acted with his usual decision on the occasion. He determined to apply a desperate remedy: to let the refractory eldest son run through his career in freedom, abroad, until he had well wearied himself, and could return

home a sobered man. Accordingly, he procured for my brother an attache's place in a foreign embassy, and insisted on his leaving England forthwith. For once in a way, Ralph was docile. He knew and cared nothing about diplomacy; but he liked the idea of living on the continent, so he took his leave of home with his best grace. My father saw him depart, with ill-concealed agitation and apprehension; although he affected to feel satisfied that, flighty and idle as Ralph was, he was incapable of voluntarily dishonouring his family, even in his most reckless moods.

After this, we heard little from my brother. His letters were few and short, and generally ended with petitions for money. The only important news of him that reached us, reached us through public channels.

He was making quite a continental reputation—a reputation, the bare mention of which made my father wince. He had fought a duel; he had imported a new dance from Hungary; he had contrived to get the smallest groom that ever was seen behind a cabriolet; he had carried off the reigning beauty among the opera-dancers of the day from all competitors; a great French cook had composed a great French dish, and christened it by his name; he was understood to be the "unknown friend," to whom a literary Polish countess had dedicated her "Letters against the restraint of the Marriage Tie;" a female German metaphysician, sixty years old, had fallen (Platonically) in love with him, and had taken to writing erotic romances in her old age. Such were some of the rumours that reached my father's ears on the subject of his son and heir!

After a long absence, he came home on a visit. How well I remember the astonishment he produced in the whole household! He had become a foreigner in manners and appearance. His mustachios were magnificent; miniature toys in gold and jewellery hung in clusters from his watch-

chain; his shirt-front was a perfect filigree of lace and cambric. He brought with him his own boxes of choice liqueurs and perfumes; his own smart, impudent, French valet; his own travelling bookcase of French novels, which he opened with his own golden key. He drank nothing but chocolate in the morning; he had long interviews with the cook, and revolutionized our dinner table. All the French newspapers were sent to him by a London agent. He altered the arrangements of his bed-room; no servant but his own valet was permitted to enter it. Family portraits that hung there, were turned to the walls, and portraits of French actresses and Italian singers were stuck to the back of the canvasses. Then he displaced a beautiful little ebony cabinet which had been in the family three hundred years; and set up in its stead a Cyprian temple of his own, in miniature, with crystal doors, behind which hung locks of hair, rings, notes written on blush-coloured paper, and other love-tokens kept as sentimental relics. His influence became all-pervading among us. He seemed to communicate to the house the change that had taken place in himself, from the reckless, racketty young Englishman to the super-exquisite foreign dandy. It was as if the fiery, effervescent atmosphere of the Boulevards of Paris had insolently penetrated into the old English mansion, and ruffled and infected its quiet native air, to the remotest corners of the place.

My father was even more dismayed than displeased by the alteration in my brother’s habits and manners—the eldest son was now farther from his ideal of what an eldest son should be, than ever. As for friends and neighbours, Ralph was heartily feared and disliked by them, before he had been in the house a week. He had an ironically patient way of listening to their conversation; an ironically respectful manner of demolishing their old-fashioned opinions, and correcting their slightest mistakes, which secretly aggravated them beyond endurance. It was worse

still, when my father, in despair, tried to tempt him into marriage, as the one final chance of working his reform; and invited half the marriageable young ladies of our acquaintance to the house, for his especial benefit.

Ralph had never shown much fondness at home, for the refinements of good female society. Abroad, he had lived as exclusively as he possibly could, among women whose characters ranged downwards by infinitesimal degrees, from the mysteriously doubtful to the notoriously bad. The highly-bred, highly-refined, highly-accomplished young English beauties had no charm for him. He detected at once the domestic conspiracy of which he was destined to become the victim. He often came up-stairs, at night, into my bed-room; and while he was amusing himself by derisively kicking about my simple clothes and simple toilette apparatus; while he was laughing in his old careless way at my quiet habits and monotonous life, used to slip in, parenthetically, all sorts of sarcasms about our young lady guests. To him, their manners were horribly inanimate; their innocence, hypocrisy of education. Pure complexions and regular features were very well, he said, as far as they went; but when a girl could not walk properly, when she shook hands with you with cold fingers, when having good eyes she could not make a stimulating use of them, then it was time to sentence the regular features and pure complexions to be taken back forthwith to the nursery from which they came. For *his* part, he missed the conversation of his witty Polish Countess, and longed for another pancake-supper with his favourite *grisettes.*

The failure of my father’s last experiment with Ralph soon became apparent. Watchful and experienced mothers began to suspect that my brother’s method of flirtation was dangerous, and his style of waltzing improper. One or two ultra-cautious parents, alarmed by the laxity of his manners and opinions, removed their daughters out of harm’s way,

by shortening their visits. The rest were spared any such necessity. My father suddenly discovered that Ralph was devoting himself rather too significantly to a young married woman who was staying in the house. The same day he had a long private interview with my brother. What passed between them, I know not; but it must have been something serious. Ralph came out of my father’s private study, very pale and very silent; ordered his luggage to be packed directly; and the next morning departed, with his French valet, and his multifarious French goods and chattels, for the continent.

Another interval passed; and then we had another short visit from him. He was still unaltered. My father’s temper suffered under this second disappointment. He became more fretful and silent; more apt to take offence than had been his wont. I particularly mention the change thus produced in his disposition, because that change was destined, at no very distant period, to act fatally upon me.

On this last occasion, also, there was another serious disagreement between father and son; and Ralph left England again in much the same way that he had left it before.

Shortly after that second departure, we heard that he had altered his manner of life. He had contracted, what would be termed in the continental code of morals, a reformatory attachment to a woman older than himself, who was living separated from her husband, when he met with her. It was this lady’s lofty ambition to be Mentor and mistress, both together! And she soon proved herself to be well qualified for her courageous undertaking. To the astonishment of everyone who knew him, Ralph suddenly turned economical; and, soon afterwards, actually resigned his post at the embassy, to be out of the way of temptation! Since that, he has returned to England; has devoted himself to collecting snuff-boxes and learning the violin; and is now

living quietly in the suburbs of London, still under the inspection of the resolute female missionary who first worked his reform.

Whether he will ever become the high-minded, high-principled country gentleman, that my father has always desired to see him, it is useless for me to guess. On the domains which he is to inherit, I shall never perhaps set foot again: in the halls where he will one day preside as master, I shall never more be sheltered. Let me now quit the subject of my elder brother, and turn to a theme which is nearer to my heart; dear to me as the last remembrance left that I can love; precious beyond all treasures in my solitude and my exile from home.

My sister!—well may I linger over your beloved name in such a record as this. A little farther on, and the darkness of crime and grief will encompass me; here, my recollections of you kindle like a pure light before my eyes—doubly pure by contrast with what lies beyond. May your kind eyes, love, be the first that fall on these pages, when the writer has parted from them for ever! May your tender hand be the first that touches these leaves, when mine is cold! Backward in my narrative, Clara, wherever I have but casually mentioned my sister, the pen has trembled and stood still. At this place, where all my remembrances of you throng upon me unrestrained, the tears gather fast and thick beyond control; and for the first time since I began my task, my courage and my calmness fail me.

It is useless to persevere longer. My hand trembles; my eyes grow dimmer and dimmer. I must close my labours for the day, and go forth to gather strength and resolution for to-morrow on the hill-tops that overlook the sea.

V.

My sister Clara is four years younger than I am. In form of face, in complexion, and—except the eyes—in features, she

bears a striking resemblance to my father. Her expressions however, must be very like what my mother’s was. Whenever I have looked at her in her silent and thoughtful moments, she has always appeared to freshen, and even to increase, my vague, childish recollections of our lost mother. Her eyes have that slight tinge of melancholy in their tenderness, and that peculiar softness in their repose, which is only seen in blue eyes. Her complexion, pale as my father’s when she is neither speaking nor moving, has in a far greater degree than his the tendency to flush, not merely in moments of agitation, but even when she is walking, or talking on any subject that interests her. Without this peculiarity her paleness would be a defect. With it, the absence of any colour in her complexion but the fugitive uncertain colour which I have described, would to some eyes debar her from any claims to beauty. And a beauty perhaps she is not—at least, in the ordinary acceptation of the term.

The lower part of her face is rather too small for the upper, her figure is too slight, the sensitiveness of her nervous organization is too constantly visible in her actions and her looks. She would not fix attention and admiration in a box at the opera; very few men passing her in the street would turn round to look after her; very few women would regard her with that slightingly attentive stare, that steady depreciating scrutiny, which a dashing decided beauty so often receives (and so often triumphs in receiving) from her personal inferiors among her own sex. The greatest charms that my sister has on the surface, come from beneath it.

When you really knew her, when she spoke to you freely, as to a friend—then, the attraction of her voice, her smile her manner, impressed you indescribably. Her slightest words and her commonest actions interested and delighted you, you knew not why. There was a beauty about her unassuming simplicity, her natural—exquisitely natural—

kindness of heart, and word, and manner, which preserved its own unobtrusive influence over you, in spite of all other rival influences, be they what they might. You missed and thought of her, when you were fresh from the society of the most beautiful and the most brilliant women. You remembered a few kind, pleasant words of hers when you forgot the wit of the wittiest ladies, the learning of the most learned. The influence thus possessed, and unconsciously possessed, by my sister over every one with whom she came in contact—over men especially—may, I think be very simply accounted for, in very few sentences.

We live in an age when too many women appear to be ambitious of morally unsexing themselves before society, by aping the language and the manners of men—especially in reference to that miserable modern dandyism of demeanour, which aims at repressing all betrayal of warmth of feeling; which abstains from displaying any enthusiasm on any subject whatever; which, in short, labours to make the fashionable imperturbability of the face the faithful reflection of the fashionable imperturbability of the mind. Women of this exclusively modern order, like to use slang expressions in their conversation; assume a bastard-masculine abruptness in their manners, a bastard-masculine licence in their opinions; affect to ridicule those outward developments of feeling which pass under the general appellation of “sentiment.” Nothing impresses, agitates, amuses, or delights them in a hearty, natural, womanly way. Sympathy looks ironical, if they ever show it: love seems to be an affair of calculation, or mockery, or contemptuous sufferance, if they ever feel it.

To women such as these, my sister Clara presented as complete a contrast as could well be conceived. In this contrast lay the secret of her influence, of the voluntary tribute of love and admiration which followed her wherever she went.

Few men have not their secret moments of deep feeling—moments when, amid the wretched trivialities and hypocrisies of modern society, the image will present itself to their minds of some woman, fresh, innocent, gentle, sincere; some woman whose emotions are still warm and impressible, whose affections and sympathies can still appear in her actions, and give the colour to her thoughts; some woman in whom we could put as perfect faith and trust, as if we were children; whom we despair of finding near the hardening influences of the world; whom we could scarcely venture to look for, except in solitary places far away in the country; in little rural shrines, shut up from society, among woods and fields, and lonesome boundary-hills. When any women happen to realise, or nearly to realise, such an image as this, they possess that universal influence which no rivalry can ever approach. On them really depends, and by then is really preserved, that claim upon the sincere respect and admiration of men, on which the power of the whole sex is based—the power so often assumed by the many, so rarely possessed but by the few.

It was thus with my sister. Thus, wherever she went, though without either the inclination, or the ambition to shine, she eclipsed women who were her superiors in beauty, in accomplishments, in brilliancy of manners and conversation—conquering by no other weapon than the purely feminine charm of everything she said, and everything she did.

But it was not amid the gaiety and grandeur of a London season that her character was displayed to the greatest advantage. It was when she was living where she loved to live, in the old country-house, among the old friends and old servants who would every one of them have died a hundred deaths for her sake, that you could study and love her best. Then, the charm there was in the mere presence of the kind, gentle, happy young English girl, who could enter into

everybody’s interests, and be grateful for everybody’s love, possessed its best and brightest influence. At picnics, lawn-parties, little country gatherings of all sorts, she was, in her own quiet, natural manner, always the presiding spirit of general comfort and general friendship. Even the rigid laws of country punctilio relaxed before her unaffected cheerfulness and irresistible good-nature. She always contrived—nobody ever knew how—to lure the most formal people into forgetting their formality, and becoming natural for the rest of the day. Even a heavy-headed, lumbering, silent country squire was not too much for her. She managed to make him feel at his ease, when no one else would undertake the task; she could listen patiently to his confused speeches about dogs, horses, and the state of the crops, when other conversations were proceeding in which she was really interested; she could receive any little grateful attention that he wished to pay her—no matter how awkward or ill-timed—as she received attentions from any one else, with a manner which showed she considered it as a favour granted to her sex, not as a right accorded to it.

So, again, she always succeeded in diminishing the long list of those pitiful affronts and offences, which play such important parts in the social drama of country society. She was a perfect Apostle-errant of the order of Reconciliation; and wherever she went, cast out the devil Sulkiness from all his strongholds—the lofty and the lowly alike. Our good rector used to call her his Volunteer Curate; and declare that she preached by a timely word, or a persuasive look, the best practical sermons on the blessings of peace-making that were ever composed.

With all this untiring good-nature, with all this resolute industry in the task of making every one happy whom she approached, there was mingled some indescribable influence, which invariably preserved her from the presumption, even of the most presuming people. I never

knew anybody venturesome enough—either by word or look—to take a liberty with her. There was something about her which inspired respect as well as love. My father, following the bent of his peculiar and favourite ideas, always thought it was the look of her race in her eyes, the ascendancy of her race in her manners. I believe it to have proceeded from a simpler and a better cause. There is a goodness of heart, which carries the shield of its purity over the open hand of its kindness: and that goodness was hers.

To my father, she was more, I believe, than he himself ever imagined—or will ever know, unless he should lose her. He was often, in his intercourse with the world, wounded severely enough in his peculiar prejudices and peculiar refinements—he was always sure to find the first respected, and the last partaken by *her.* He could trust in her implicitly, he could feel assured that she was not only willing, but able, to share and relieve his domestic troubles and anxieties. If he had been less fretfully anxious about his eldest son; if he had wisely distrusted from the first his own powers of persuading and reforming, and had allowed Clara to exercise her influence over Ralph more constantly and more completely than he really did, I am persuaded that the long-expected epoch of my brother’s transformation would have really arrived by this time, or even before it.

The strong and deep feelings of my sister’s nature lay far below the surface—for a woman, too far below it. Suffering was, for her, silent, secret, long enduring; often almost entirely void of outward vent or development. I never remember seeing her in tears, except on rare and very serious occasions. Unless you looked at her narrowly, you would judge her to be little sensitive to ordinary griefs and troubles. At such times, her eyes only grew dimmer and less animated than usual; the paleness of her complexion became rather more marked; her lips closed and trembled involuntarily—but this was all: there was no sighing, no

weeping, no speaking even. And yet she suffered acutely. The very strength of her emotions was in their silence and their secresy. I, of all others—I, guilty of infecting with my anguish the pure heart that loved me—ought to know this best!

How long I might linger over all that she has done for *me!* As I now approach nearer and nearer to the pages which are to reveal my fatal story, so I am more and more tempted to delay over those better and purer remembrances of my sister which now occupy my mind. The first little presents—innocent girlish presents—which she secretly sent to me at school; the first sweet days of our uninterrupted intercourse, when the close of my college life restored me to home; her first inestimable sympathies with my first fugitive vanities of embryo authorship, are thronging back fast and fondly on my thoughts, while I now write.

But these memories must be calmed and disciplined. I must be collected and impartial over my narrative—if it be only to make that narrative show fairly and truly, without suppression or exaggeration, all that I have owed to her.

Not merely all that I *have* owed to her; but all that I owe to her now. Though I may never see her again, but in my thoughts; still she influences, comforts, cheers me on to hope, as if she were already the guardian spirit of the cottage where I live. Even in my worst moments of despair, I can still remember that Clara is thinking of me and sorrowing for me: I can still feel that remembrance, as an invisible hand of mercy which supports me, sinking; which raises me, fallen; which may yet lead me safely and tenderly to my hard journey’s end.

VI.

I have now completed all the preliminary notices of my near relatives, which it is necessary to present in these