
CLASSICS TO GO
NO NAME
WILKIE COLLINS

No Name

Wilkie Collins

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PREFACE.

The main purpose of this story is to appeal to the reader’s interest in a subject which has been the theme of some of the greatest writers, living and dead—but which has never been, and can never be, exhausted, because it is a subject eternally interesting to all mankind. Here is one more book that depicts the struggle of a human creature, under those opposing influences of Good and Evil, which we have all felt, which we have all known. It has been my aim to make the character of “Magdalen,” which personifies this struggle, a pathetic character even in its perversity and its error; and I have tried hard to attain this result by the least obtrusive and the least artificial of all means—by a resolute adherence throughout to the truth as it is in Nature. This design was no easy one to accomplish; and it has been a great encouragement to me (during the publication of my story in its periodical form) to know, on the authority of many readers, that the object which I had proposed to myself, I might, in some degree, consider as an object achieved.

Round the central figure in the narrative other characters will be found grouped, in sharp contrast—contrast, for the most part, in which I have endeavored to make the element of humor mainly predominant. I have sought to impart this relief to the more serious passages in the book, not only because I believe myself to be justified in doing so by the laws of Art—but because experience has taught me (what the experience of my readers will doubtless confirm) that there is no such moral phenomenon as unmixed tragedy to be found in the world around us. Look where we may, the dark threads and the light cross each other perpetually in the texture of human life.

To pass from the Characters to the Story, it will be seen that the narrative related in these pages has been constructed on a plan which differs from the plan followed in my last novel, and in some other of my works published at an earlier date. The only Secret contained in this book is revealed midway in the first volume. From that point, all the main events of the story are purposely foreshadowed before they take place—my present design being to rouse the reader’s interest in following the train of circumstances by which these foreseen events are brought about. In trying this new ground, I am not turning my back in doubt on the ground which I have passed over already. My one object in following a new course is to enlarge the range of my studies in the art of writing fiction, and to vary the form in which I make my appeal to the reader, as attractively as I can.

There is no need for me to add more to these few prefatory words than is here written. What I might otherwise have wished to say in this place, I have endeavored to make the book itself say for me.

Harley Street,
November, 1862

THE FIRST SCENE.
COMBE-RAVEN, SOMERSETSHIRE.

CHAPTER I.

The hands on the hall-clock pointed to half-past six in the morning. The house was a country residence in West Somersetshire, called Combe-Raven. The day was the fourth of March, and the year was eighteen hundred and forty-six.

No sounds but the steady ticking of the clock, and the lumpish snoring of a large dog stretched on a mat outside the dining-room door, disturbed the mysterious morning stillness of hall and staircase. Who were the sleepers hidden in the upper regions? Let the house reveal its own secrets; and, one by one, as they descend the stairs from their beds, let the sleepers disclose themselves.

As the clock pointed to a quarter to seven, the dog woke and shook himself. After waiting in vain for the footman, who was accustomed to let him out, the animal wandered restlessly from one closed door to another on the ground-floor; and, returning to his mat in great perplexity, appealed to the sleeping family with a long and melancholy howl.

Before the last notes of the dog’s remonstrance had died away, the oaken stairs in the higher regions of the house creaked under slowly-descending footsteps. In a minute more the first of the female servants made her appearance, with a dingy woolen shawl over her shoulders—for the March morning was bleak; and rheumatism and the cook were old acquaintances.

Receiving the dog’s first cordial advances with the worst possible grace, the cook slowly opened the hall door and let the animal out. It was a wild morning. Over a spacious lawn, and behind a black plantation of firs, the rising sun rent its way upward through piles of ragged gray cloud; heavy drops of rain fell few and far between; the March wind shuddered

round the corners of the house, and the wet trees swayed wearily.

Seven o’clock struck; and the signs of domestic life began to show themselves in more rapid succession.

The housemaid came down—tall and slim, with the state of the spring temperature written redly on her nose. The lady’s-maid followed—young, smart, plump, and sleepy. The kitchen-maid came next—afflicted with the face-ache, and making no secret of her sufferings. Last of all, the footman appeared, yawning disconsolately; the living picture of a man who felt that he had been defrauded of his fair night’s rest.

The conversation of the servants, when they assembled before the slowly lighting kitchen fire, referred to a recent family event, and turned at starting on this question: Had Thomas, the footman, seen anything of the concert at Clifton, at which his master and the two young ladies had been present on the previous night? Yes; Thomas had heard the concert; he had been paid for to go in at the back; it was a loud concert; it was a hot concert; it was described at the top of the bills as Grand; whether it was worth traveling sixteen miles to hear by railway, with the additional hardship of going back nineteen miles by road, at half-past one in the morning—was a question which he would leave his master and the young ladies to decide; his own opinion, in the meantime, being unhesitatingly, No. Further inquiries, on the part of all the female servants in succession, elicited no additional information of any sort. Thomas could hum none of the songs, and could describe none of the ladies’ dresses. His audience, accordingly, gave him up in despair; and the kitchen small-talk flowed back into its ordinary channels, until the clock struck eight and startled the assembled servants into separating for their morning’s work.

A quarter past eight, and nothing happened. Half-past—and more signs of life appeared from the bedroom regions. The next member of the family who came downstairs was Mr. Andrew Vanstone, the master of the house.

Tall, stout, and upright—with bright blue eyes, and healthy, florid complexion—his brown plush shooting-jacket carelessly buttoned awry; his vixenish little Scotch terrier barking unrebuked at his heels; one hand thrust into his waistcoat pocket, and the other smacking the banisters cheerfully as he came downstairs humming a tune—Mr. Vanstone showed his character on the surface of him freely to all men. An easy, hearty, handsome, good-humored gentleman, who walked on the sunny side of the way of life, and who asked nothing better than to meet all his fellow-passengers in this world on the sunny side, too. Estimating him by years, he had turned fifty. Judging him by lightness of heart, strength of constitution, and capacity for enjoyment, he was no older than most men who have only turned thirty.

“Thomas!” cried Mr. Vanstone, taking up his old felt hat and his thick walking stick from the hall table. “Breakfast, this morning, at ten. The young ladies are not likely to be down earlier after the concert last night.—By-the-by, how did you like the concert yourself, eh? You thought it was grand? Quite right; so it was. Nothing but crash-bang, varied now and then by bang-crash; all the women dressed within an inch of their lives; smothering heat, blazing gas, and no room for anybody—yes, yes, Thomas; grand’s the word for it, and comfortable isn’t.” With that expression of opinion, Mr. Vanstone whistled to his vixenish terrier; flourished his stick at the hall door in cheerful defiance of the rain; and set off through wind and weather for his morning walk.

The hands, stealing their steady way round the dial of the clock, pointed to ten minutes to nine. Another member of

the family appeared on the stairs—Miss Garth, the governess.

No observant eyes could have surveyed Miss Garth without seeing at once that she was a north-countrywoman. Her hard featured face; her masculine readiness and decision of movement; her obstinate honesty of look and manner, all proclaimed her border birth and border training. Though little more than forty years of age, her hair was quite gray; and she wore over it the plain cap of an old woman. Neither hair nor head-dress was out of harmony with her face—it looked older than her years: the hard handwriting of trouble had scored it heavily at some past time. The self-possession of her progress downstairs, and the air of habitual authority with which she looked about her, spoke well for her position in Mr. Vanstone's family. This was evidently not one of the forlorn, persecuted, pitiably dependent order of governesses. Here was a woman who lived on ascertained and honorable terms with her employers—a woman who looked capable of sending any parents in England to the right-about, if they failed to rate her at her proper value.

"Breakfast at ten?" repeated Miss Garth, when the footman had answered the bell, and had mentioned his master's orders. "Ha! I thought what would come of that concert last night. When people who live in the country patronize public amusements, public amusements return the compliment by upsetting the family afterward for days together. *You're* upset, Thomas, I can see your eyes are as red as a ferret's, and your cravat looks as if you had slept in it. Bring the kettle at a quarter to ten—and if you don't get better in the course of the day, come to me, and I'll give you a dose of physic. That's a well-meaning lad, if you only let him alone," continued Miss Garth, in soliloquy, when Thomas had retired; "but he's not strong enough for

concerts twenty miles off. They wanted *me* to go with them last night. Yes: catch me!”

Nine o’clock struck; and the minute-hand stole on to twenty minutes past the hour, before any more footsteps were heard on the stairs. At the end of that time, two ladies appeared, descending to the breakfast-room together—Mrs. Vanstone and her eldest daughter.

If the personal attractions of Mrs. Vanstone, at an earlier period of life, had depended solely on her native English charms of complexion and freshness, she must have long since lost the last relics of her fairer self. But her beauty as a young woman had passed beyond the average national limits; and she still preserved the advantage of her more exceptional personal gifts. Although she was now in her forty-fourth year; although she had been tried, in bygone times, by the premature loss of more than one of her children, and by long attacks of illness which had followed those bereavements of former years—she still preserved the fair proportion and subtle delicacy of feature, once associated with the all-adorning brightness and freshness of beauty, which had left her never to return. Her eldest child, now descending the stairs by her side, was the mirror in which she could look back and see again the reflection of her own youth. There, folded thick on the daughter’s head, lay the massive dark hair, which, on the mother’s, was fast turning gray. There, in the daughter’s cheek, glowed the lovely dusky red which had faded from the mother’s to bloom again no more. Miss Vanstone had already reached the first maturity of womanhood; she had completed her six-and-twentieth year. Inheriting the dark majestic character of her mother’s beauty, she had yet hardly inherited all its charms. Though the shape of her face was the same, the features were scarcely so delicate, their proportion was scarcely so true. She was not so tall. She had the dark-brown eyes of her mother—full and soft, with the

steady luster in them which Mrs. Vanstone's eyes had lost—and yet there was less interest, less refinement and depth of feeling in her expression: it was gentle and feminine, but clouded by a certain quiet reserve, from which her mother's face was free. If we dare to look closely enough, may we not observe that the moral force of character and the higher intellectual capacities in parents seem often to wear out mysteriously in the course of transmission to children? In these days of insidious nervous exhaustion and subtly-spreading nervous malady, is it not possible that the same rule may apply, less rarely than we are willing to admit, to the bodily gifts as well?

The mother and daughter slowly descended the stairs together—the first dressed in dark brown, with an Indian shawl thrown over her shoulders; the second more simply attired in black, with a plain collar and cuffs, and a dark orange-colored ribbon over the bosom of her dress. As they crossed the hall and entered the breakfast-room, Miss Vanstone was full of the all-absorbing subject of the last night's concert.

"I am so sorry, mamma, you were not with us," she said. "You have been so strong and so well ever since last summer—you have felt so many years younger, as you said yourself—that I am sure the exertion would not have been too much for you."

"Perhaps not, my love—but it was as well to keep on the safe side."

"Quite as well," remarked Miss Garth, appearing at the breakfast-room door. "Look at Norah (good-morning, my dear)—look, I say, at Norah. A perfect wreck; a living proof of your wisdom and mine in staying at home. The vile gas, the foul air, the late hours—what can you expect? She's not made of iron, and she suffers accordingly. No, my dear, you needn't deny it. I see you've got a headache."

Norah’s dark, handsome face brightened into a smile—then lightly clouded again with its accustomed quiet reserve.

“A very little headache; not half enough to make me regret the concert,” she said, and walked away by herself to the window.

On the far side of a garden and paddock the view overlooked a stream, some farm buildings which lay beyond, and the opening of a wooded, rocky pass (called, in Somersetshire, a Combe), which here cleft its way through the hills that closed the prospect. A winding strip of road was visible, at no great distance, amid the undulations of the open ground; and along this strip the stalwart figure of Mr. Vanstone was now easily recognizable, returning to the house from his morning walk. He flourished his stick gayly, as he observed his eldest daughter at the window. She nodded and waved her hand in return, very gracefully and prettily—but with something of old-fashioned formality in her manner, which looked strangely in so young a woman, and which seemed out of harmony with a salutation addressed to her father.

The hall-clock struck the adjourned breakfast-hour. When the minute hand had recorded the lapse of five minutes more a door banged in the bedroom regions—a clear young voice was heard singing blithely—light, rapid footsteps pattered on the upper stairs, descended with a jump to the landing, and pattered again, faster than ever, down the lower flight. In another moment the youngest of Mr. Vanstone’s two daughters (and two only surviving children) dashed into view on the dingy old oaken stairs, with the suddenness of a flash of light; and clearing the last three steps into the hall at a jump, presented herself breathless in the breakfast-room to make the family circle complete.

By one of those strange caprices of Nature, which science leaves still unexplained, the youngest of Mr. Vanstone's children presented no recognizable resemblance to either of her parents. How had she come by her hair? how had she come by her eyes? Even her father and mother had asked themselves those questions, as she grew up to girlhood, and had been sorely perplexed to answer them. Her hair was of that purely light-brown hue, unmixed with flaxen, or yellow, or red—which is oftener seen on the plumage of a bird than on the head of a human being. It was soft and plentiful, and waved downward from her low forehead in regular folds—but, to some tastes, it was dull and dead, in its absolute want of glossiness, in its monotonous purity of plain light color. Her eyebrows and eyelashes were just a shade darker than her hair, and seemed made expressly for those violet-blue eyes, which assert their most irresistible charm when associated with a fair complexion. But it was here exactly that the promise of her face failed of performance in the most startling manner. The eyes, which should have been dark, were incomprehensibly and discordantly light; they were of that nearly colorless gray which, though little attractive in itself, possesses the rare compensating merit of interpreting the finest gradations of thought, the gentlest changes of feeling, the deepest trouble of passion, with a subtle transparency of expression which no darker eyes can rival. Thus quaintly self-contradictory in the upper part of her face, she was hardly less at variance with established ideas of harmony in the lower. Her lips had the true feminine delicacy of form, her cheeks the lovely roundness and smoothness of youth—but the mouth was too large and firm, the chin too square and massive for her sex and age. Her complexion partook of the pure monotony of tint which characterized her hair—it was of the same soft, warm, creamy fairness all over, without a tinge of color in the cheeks, except on occasions of unusual bodily exertion or sudden mental disturbance. The whole countenance—so

remarkable in its strongly opposed characteristics—was rendered additionally striking by its extraordinary mobility. The large, electric, light-gray eyes were hardly ever in repose; all varieties of expression followed each other over the plastic, ever-changing face, with a giddy rapidity which left sober analysis far behind in the race. The girl's exuberant vitality asserted itself all over her, from head to foot. Her figure—taller than her sister's, taller than the average of woman's height; instinct with such a seductive, serpentine suppleness, so lightly and playfully graceful, that its movements suggested, not unnaturally, the movements of a young cat—her figure was so perfectly developed already that no one who saw her could have supposed that she was only eighteen. She bloomed in the full physical maturity of twenty years or more—bloomed naturally and irresistibly, in right of her matchless health and strength. Here, in truth, lay the mainspring of this strangely-constituted organization. Her headlong course down the house stairs; the brisk activity of all her movements; the incessant sparkle of expression in her face; the enticing gayety which took the hearts of the quietest people by storm—even the reckless delight in bright colors which showed itself in her brilliantly-striped morning dress, in her fluttering ribbons, in the large scarlet rosettes on her smart little shoes—all sprang alike from the same source; from the overflowing physical health which strengthened every muscle, braced every nerve, and set the warm young blood tingling through her veins, like the blood of a growing child.

On her entry into the breakfast-room, she was saluted with the customary remonstrance which her flighty disregard of all punctuality habitually provoked from the long-suffering household authorities. In Miss Garth's favorite phrase, "Magdalen was born with all the senses—except a sense of order."

Magdalen! It was a strange name to have given her? Strange, indeed; and yet, chosen under no extraordinary circumstances. The name had been borne by one of Mr. Vanstone's sisters, who had died in early youth; and, in affectionate remembrance of her, he had called his second daughter by it—just as he had called his eldest daughter Norah, for his wife's sake. Magdalen! Surely, the grand old Bible name—suggestive of a sad and somber dignity; recalling, in its first association, mournful ideas of penitence and seclusion—had been here, as events had turned out, inappropriately bestowed? Surely, this self-contradictory girl had perversely accomplished one contradiction more, by developing into a character which was out of all harmony with her own Christian name!

"Late again!" said Mrs. Vanstone, as Magdalen breathlessly kissed her.

"Late again!" chimed in Miss Garth, when Magdalen came her way next. "Well?" she went on, taking the girl's chin familiarly in her hand, with a half-satirical, half-fond attention which betrayed that the youngest daughter, with all her faults, was the governess's favorite—"Well? and what has the concert done for *you?* What form of suffering has dissipation inflicted on *your* system this morning?"

"Suffering!" repeated Magdalen, recovering her breath, and the use of her tongue with it. "I don't know the meaning of the word: if there's anything the matter with me, I'm too well. Suffering! I'm ready for another concert to-night, and a ball to-morrow, and a play the day after. Oh," cried Magdalen, dropping into a chair and crossing her hands rapturously on the table, "how I do like pleasure!"

"Come! that's explicit at any rate," said Miss Garth. "I think Pope must have had you in his mind when he wrote his famous lines:

> "Men some to business, some to pleasure take,
> But every woman is at heart a rake."

“The deuce she is!” cried Mr. Vanstone, entering the room while Miss Garth was making her quotation, with the dogs at his heels. “Well; live and learn. If you’re all rakes, Miss Garth, the sexes are turned topsy-turvy with a vengeance; and the men will have nothing left for it but to stop at home and darn the stockings.—Let’s have some breakfast.”

“How-d’ye-do, papa?” said Magdalen, taking Mr. Vanstone as boisterously round the neck as if he belonged to some larger order of Newfoundland dog, and was made to be romped with at his daughter’s convenience. “I’m the rake Miss Garth means; and I want to go to another concert—or a play, if you like—or a ball, if you prefer it—or anything else in the way of amusement that puts me into a new dress, and plunges me into a crowd of people, and illuminates me with plenty of light, and sets me in a tingle of excitement all over, from head to foot. Anything will do, as long as it doesn’t send us to bed at eleven o’clock.”

Mr. Vanstone sat down composedly under his daughter’s flow of language, like a man who was well used to verbal inundation from that quarter. “If I am to be allowed my choice of amusements next time,” said the worthy gentleman, “I think a play will suit me better than a concert. The girls enjoyed themselves amazingly, my dear,” he continued, addressing his wife. “More than I did, I must say. It was altogether above my mark. They played one piece of music which lasted forty minutes. It stopped three times, by-the-way; and we all thought it was done each time, and clapped our hands, rejoiced to be rid of it. But on it went again, to our great surprise and mortification, till we gave it up in despair, and all wished ourselves at Jericho. Norah, my dear! when we had crash-bang for forty minutes, with three stoppages by-the-way, what did they call it?”

“A symphony, papa,” replied Norah.

“Yes, you darling old Goth, a symphony by the great Beethoven!” added Magdalen. “How can you say you were

not amused? Have you forgotten the yellow-looking foreign woman, with the unpronounceable name? Don’t you remember the faces she made when she sang? and the way she courtesied and courtesied, till she cheated the foolish people into crying encore? Look here, mamma—look here, Miss Garth!”

She snatched up an empty plate from the table, to represent a sheet of music, held it before her in the established concert-room position, and produced an imitation of the unfortunate singer’s grimaces and courtesyings, so accurately and quaintly true to the original, that her father roared with laughter; and even the footman (who came in at that moment with the post-bag) rushed out of the room again, and committed the indecorum of echoing his master audibly on the other side of the door.

“Letters, papa. I want the key,” said Magdalen, passing from the imitation at the breakfast-table to the post-bag on the sideboard with the easy abruptness which characterized all her actions.

Mr. Vanstone searched his pockets and shook his head. Though his youngest daughter might resemble him in nothing else, it was easy to see where Magdalen’s unmethodical habits came from.

“I dare say I have left it in the library, along with my other keys,” said Mr. Vanstone. “Go and look for it, my dear.”

“You really should check Magdalen,” pleaded Mrs. Vanstone, addressing her husband when her daughter had left the room. “Those habits of mimicry are growing on her; and she speaks to you with a levity which it is positively shocking to hear.”

“Exactly what I have said myself, till I am tired of repeating it,” remarked Miss Garth. “She treats Mr. Vanstone as if he was a kind of younger brother of hers.”

“You are kind to us in everything else, papa; and you make kind allowances for Magdalen’s high spirits—don’t you?” said the quiet Norah, taking her father’s part and her sister’s with so little show of resolution on the surface that few observers would have been sharp enough to detect the genuine substance beneath it.

“Thank you, my dear,” said good-natured Mr. Vanstone. “Thank you for a very pretty speech. As for Magdalen,” he continued, addressing his wife and Miss Garth, “she’s an unbroken filly. Let her caper and kick in the paddock to her heart’s content. Time enough to break her to harness when she gets a little older.”

The door opened, and Magdalen returned with the key. She unlocked the post-bag at the sideboard and poured out the letters in a heap. Sorting them gayly in less than a minute, she approached the breakfast-table with both hands full, and delivered the letters all round with the business-like rapidity of a London postman.

“Two for Norah,” she announced, beginning with her sister. “Three for Miss Garth. None for mamma. One for me. And the other six all for papa. You lazy old darling, you hate answering letters, don’t you?” pursued Magdalen, dropping the postman’s character and assuming the daughter’s. “How you will grumble and fidget in the study! and how you will wish there were no such things as letters in the world! and how red your nice old bald head will get at the top with the worry of writing the answers; and how many of the answers you will leave until tomorrow after all! *The Bristol Theater’s open, papa,*” she whispered, slyly and suddenly, in her father’s ear; “I saw it in the newspaper when I went to the library to get the key. Let’s go to-morrow night!”

While his daughter was chattering, Mr. Vanstone was mechanically sorting his letters. He turned over the first four in succession and looked carelessly at the addresses. When he came to the fifth his attention, which had hitherto

wandered toward Magdalen, suddenly became fixed on the post-mark of the letter.

Stooping over him, with her head on his shoulder, Magdalen could see the post-mark as plainly as her father saw it—NEW ORLEANS.

“An American letter, papa!” she said. “Who do you know at New Orleans?”

Mrs. Vanstone started, and looked eagerly at her husband the moment Magdalen spoke those words.

Mr. Vanstone said nothing. He quietly removed his daughter’s arm from his neck, as if he wished to be free from all interruption. She returned, accordingly, to her place at the breakfast-table. Her father, with the letter in his hand, waited a little before he opened it; her mother looking at him, the while, with an eager, expectant attention which attracted Miss Garth’s notice, and Norah’s, as well as Magdalen’s.

After a minute or more of hesitation Mr. Vanstone opened the letter.

His face changed color the instant he read the first lines; his cheeks fading to a dull, yellow-brown hue, which would have been ashy paleness in a less florid man; and his expression becoming saddened and overclouded in a moment. Norah and Magdalen, watching anxiously, saw nothing but the change that passed over their father. Miss Garth alone observed the effect which that change produced on the attentive mistress of the house.

It was not the effect which she, or any one, could have anticipated. Mrs. Vanstone looked excited rather than alarmed. A faint flush rose on her cheeks—her eyes brightened—she stirred the tea round and round in her cup in a restless, impatient manner which was not natural to her.

Magdalen, in her capacity of spoiled child, was, as usual, the first to break the silence.

“What *is* the matter, papa?” she asked.

“Nothing,” said Mr. Vanstone, sharply, without looking up at her.

“I’m sure there must be something,” persisted Magdalen. “I’m sure there is bad news, papa, in that American letter.”

“There is nothing in the letter that concerns *you*,” said Mr. Vanstone.

It was the first direct rebuff that Magdalen had ever received from her father. She looked at him with an incredulous surprise, which would have been irresistibly absurd under less serious circumstances.

Nothing more was said. For the first time, perhaps, in their lives, the family sat round the breakfast-table in painful silence. Mr. Vanstone’s hearty morning appetite, like his hearty morning spirits, was gone. He absently broke off some morsels of dry toast from the rack near him, absently finished his first cup of tea—then asked for a second, which he left before him untouched.

“Norah,” he said, after an interval, “you needn’t wait for me. Magdalen, my dear, you can go when you like.”

His daughters rose immediately; and Miss Garth considerately followed their example. When an easy-tempered man does assert himself in his family, the rarity of the demonstration invariably has its effect; and the will of that easy-tempered man is Law.

“What can have happened?” whispered Norah, as they closed the breakfast-room door and crossed the hall.

“What does papa mean by being cross with Me?” exclaimed Magdalen, chafing under a sense of her own injuries.

“May I ask—what right you had to pry into your father’s private affairs?” retorted Miss Garth.

“Right?” repeated Magdalen. “I have no secrets from papa—what business has papa to have secrets from me! I consider myself insulted.”

“If you considered yourself properly reproved for not minding your own business,” said the plain-spoken Miss Garth, “you would be a trifle nearer the truth. Ah! you are like all the rest of the girls in the present day. Not one in a hundred of you knows which end of her’s uppermost.”

The three ladies entered the morning-room; and Magdalen acknowledged Miss Garth’s reproof by banging the door.

Half an hour passed, and neither Mr. Vanstone nor his wife left the breakfast-room. The servant, ignorant of what had happened, went in to clear the table—found his master and mistress seated close together in deep consultation—and immediately went out again. Another quarter of an hour elapsed before the breakfast-room door was opened, and the private conference of the husband and wife came to an end.

“I hear mamma in the hall,” said Norah. “Perhaps she is coming to tell us something.”

Mrs. Vanstone entered the morning-room as her daughter spoke. The color was deeper on her cheeks, and the brightness of half-dried tears glistened in her eyes; her step was more hasty, all her movements were quicker than usual.

“I bring news, my dears, which will surprise you,” she said, addressing her daughters. “Your father and I are going to London to-morrow.”

Magdalen caught her mother by the arm in speechless astonishment. Miss Garth dropped her work on her lap; even the sedate Norah started to her feet, and amazedly repeated the words, “Going to London!”

“Without us?” added Magdalen.

“Your father and I are going alone,” said Mrs. Vanstone. “Perhaps, for as long as three weeks—but not longer. We are going”—she hesitated—“we are going on important family business. Don’t hold me, Magdalen. This is a sudden necessity—I have a great deal to do to-day—many things to set in order before tomorrow. There, there, my love, let me go.”

She drew her arm away; hastily kissed her youngest daughter on the forehead; and at once left the room again. Even Magdalen saw that her mother was not to be coaxed into hearing or answering any more questions.

The morning wore on, and nothing was seen of Mr. Vanstone. With the reckless curiosity of her age and character, Magdalen, in defiance of Miss Garth’s prohibition and her sister’s remonstrances, determined to go to the study and look for her father there. When she tried the door, it was locked on the inside. She said, “It’s only me, papa;” and waited for the answer. “I’m busy now, my dear,” was the answer. “Don’t disturb me.”

Mrs. Vanstone was, in another way, equally inaccessible. She remained in her own room, with the female servants about her, immersed in endless preparations for the approaching departure. The servants, little used in that family to sudden resolutions and unexpected orders, were awkward and confused in obeying directions. They ran from room to room unnecessarily, and lost time and patience in jostling each other on the stairs. If a stranger had entered the house that day, he might have imagined that an unexpected disaster had happened in it, instead of an unexpected necessity for a journey to London. Nothing proceeded in its ordinary routine. Magdalen, who was accustomed to pass the morning at the piano, wandered restlessly about the staircases and passages, and in and out of doors when there were glimpses of fine weather. Norah, whose fondness for reading had passed into a family

proverb, took up book after book from table and shelf, and laid them down again, in despair of fixing her attention. Even Miss Garth felt the all-pervading influence of the household disorganization, and sat alone by the morning-room fire, with her head shaking ominously, and her work laid aside.

“Family affairs?” thought Miss Garth, pondering over Mrs. Vanstone’s vague explanatory words. “I have lived twelve years at Combe-Raven; and these are the first family affairs which have got between the parents and the children, in all my experience. What does it mean? Change? I suppose I’m getting old. I don’t like change.”

CHAPTER II.

At ten o’clock the next morning Norah and Magdalen stood alone in the hall at Combe-Raven watching the departure of the carriage which took their father and mother to the London train.

Up to the last moment, both the sisters had hoped for some explanation of that mysterious “family business” to which Mrs. Vanstone had so briefly alluded on the previous day. No such explanation had been offered. Even the agitation of the leave-taking, under circumstances entirely new in the home experience of the parents and children, had not shaken the resolute discretion of Mr. and Mrs. Vanstone. They had gone—with the warmest testimonies of affection, with farewell embraces fervently reiterated again and again—but without dropping one word, from first to last, of the nature of their errand.

As the grating sound of the carriage-wheels ceased suddenly at a turn in the road, the sisters looked one another in the face; each feeling, and each betraying in her own way, the dreary sense that she was openly excluded, for the first time, from the confidence of her parents. Norah’s customary reserve strengthened into sullen silence—she sat down in one of the hall chairs and looked out frowningly through the open house door. Magdalen, as usual when her temper was ruffled, expressed her dissatisfaction in the plainest terms. “I don’t care who knows it—I think we are both of us shamefully ill-used!” With those words, the young lady followed her sister’s example by seating herself on a hall chair and looking aimlessly out through the open house door.

Almost at the same moment Miss Garth entered the hall from the morning-room. Her quick observation showed her

the necessity for interfering to some practical purpose; and her ready good sense at once pointed the way.

“Look up, both of you, if you please, and listen to me,” said Miss Garth. “If we are all three to be comfortable and happy together, now we are alone, we must stick to our usual habits and go on in our regular way. There is the state of things in plain words. Accept the situation—as the French say. Here am I to set you the example. I have just ordered an excellent dinner at the customary hour. I am going to the medicine-chest next, to physic the kitchen-maid—an unwholesome girl, whose face-ache is all stomach. In the meantime, Norah, my dear, you will find your work and your books, as usual, in the library. Magdalen, suppose you leave off tying your handkerchief into knots and use your fingers on the keys of the piano instead? We’ll lunch at one, and take the dogs out afterward. Be as brisk and cheerful both of you as I am. Come, rouse up directly. If I see those gloomy faces any longer, as sure as my name’s Garth, I’ll give your mother written warning and go back to my friends by the mixed train at twelve forty.”

Concluding her address of expostulation in those terms, Miss Garth led Norah to the library door, pushed Magdalen into the morning-room, and went on her own way sternly to the regions of the medicine-chest.

In this half-jesting, half-earnest manner she was accustomed to maintain a sort of friendly authority over Mr. Vanstone’s daughters, after her proper functions as governess had necessarily come to an end. Norah, it is needless to say, had long since ceased to be her pupil; and Magdalen had, by this time, completed her education. But Miss Garth had lived too long and too intimately under Mr. Vanstone’s roof to be parted with for any purely formal considerations; and the first hint at going away which she had thought it her duty to drop was dismissed with such affectionate warmth of protest that she never repeated it

again, except in jest. The entire management of the household was, from that time forth, left in her hands; and to those duties she was free to add what companionable assistance she could render to Norah’s reading, and what friendly superintendence she could still exercise over Magdalen’s music. Such were the terms on which Miss Garth was now a resident in Mr. Vanstone’s family.

Toward the afternoon the weather improved. At half-past one the sun was shining brightly; and the ladies left the house, accompanied by the dogs, to set forth on their walk.

They crossed the stream, and ascended by the little rocky pass to the hills beyond; then diverged to the left, and returned by a cross-road which led through the village of Combe-Raven.

As they came in sight of the first cottages, they passed a man, hanging about the road, who looked attentively, first at Magdalen, then at Norah. They merely observed that he was short, that he was dressed in black, and that he was a total stranger to them—and continued their homeward walk, without thinking more about the loitering foot-passenger whom they had met on their way back.

After they had left the village, and had entered the road which led straight to the house, Magdalen surprised Miss Garth by announcing that the stranger in black had turned, after they had passed him, and was now following them. “He keeps on Norah’s side of the road,” she said, mischievously. “I’m not the attraction—don’t blame *me*.”

Whether the man was really following them, or not, made little difference, for they were now close to the house. As they passed through the lodge-gates, Miss Garth looked round, and saw that the stranger was quickening his pace, apparently with the purpose of entering into conversation. Seeing this, she at once directed the young ladies to go on

to the house with the dogs, while she herself waited for events at the gate.

There was just time to complete this discreet arrangement, before the stranger reached the lodge. He took off his hat to Miss Garth politely, as she turned round. What did he look like, on the face of him? He looked like a clergyman in difficulties.

Taking his portrait, from top to toe, the picture of him began with a tall hat, broadly encircled by a mourning band of crumpled crape. Below the hat was a lean, long, sallow face, deeply pitted with the smallpox, and characterized, very remarkably, by eyes of two different colors—one bilious green, one bilious brown, both sharply intelligent. His hair was iron-gray, carefully brushed round at the temples. His cheeks and chin were in the bluest bloom of smooth shaving; his nose was short Roman; his lips long, thin, and supple, curled up at the corners with a mildly-humorous smile. His white cravat was high, stiff, and dingy; the collar, higher, stiffer, and dingier, projected its rigid points on either side beyond his chin. Lower down, the lithe little figure of the man was arrayed throughout in sober-shabby black. His frock-coat was buttoned tight round the waist, and left to bulge open majestically at the chest. His hands were covered with black cotton gloves neatly darned at the fingers; his umbrella, worn down at the ferule to the last quarter of an inch, was carefully preserved, nevertheless, in an oilskin case. The front view of him was the view in which he looked oldest; meeting him face to face, he might have been estimated at fifty or more. Walking behind him, his back and shoulders were almost young enough to have passed for five-and-thirty. His manners were distinguished by a grave serenity. When he opened his lips, he spoke in a rich bass voice, with an easy flow of language, and a strict attention to the elocutionary claims of words in more than one syllable. Persuasion distilled from his mildly-curling lips;