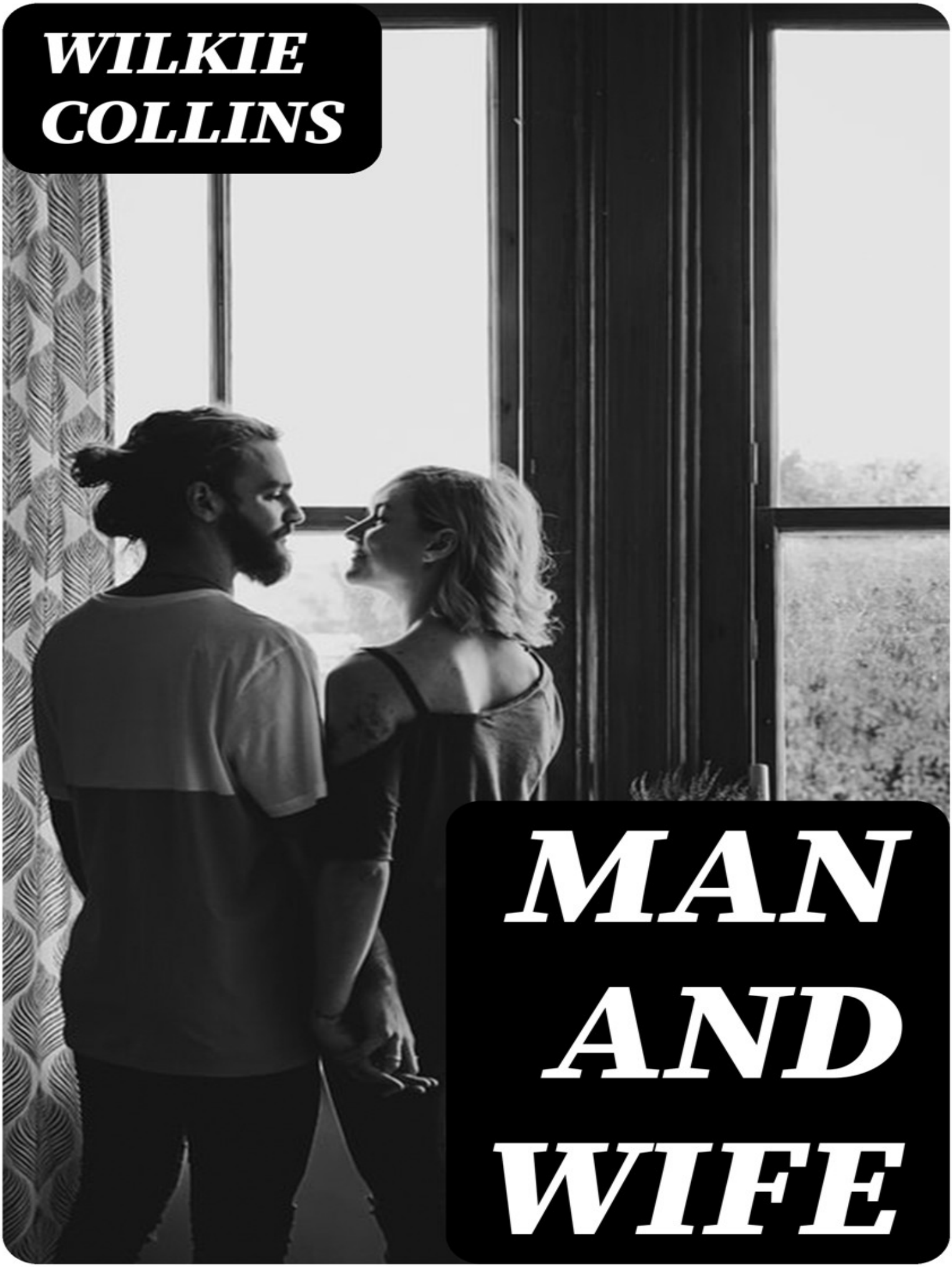
WILKIE COLLINS



MAN AND WIFE

Wilkie Collins

Man and Wife

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PROLOGUE.—THE IRISH MARRIAGE.

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THE VILLA AT HAMPSTEAD. I.

ON a summer’s morning, between thirty and forty years ago, two girls were crying bitterly in the cabin of an East Indian passenger ship, bound outward, from Gravesend to Bombay.

They were both of the same age—eighteen. They had both, from childhood upward, been close and dear friends at the same school. They were now parting for the first time—and parting, it might be, for life.

The name of one was Blanche. The name of the other was Anne.

Both were the children of poor parents, both had been pupil-teachers at the school; and both were destined to earn their own bread. Personally speaking, and socially speaking, these were the only points of resemblance between them.

Blanche was passably attractive and passably intelligent, and no more. Anne was rarely beautiful and rarely endowed. Blanche’s parents were worthy people, whose first consideration was to secure, at any sacrifice, the future well-being of their child. Anne’s parents were heartless and depraved. Their one idea, in connection with their daughter, was to speculate on her beauty, and to turn her abilities to profitable account.

The girls were starting in life under widely different conditions. Blanche was going to India, to be governess in the household of a Judge, under care of the Judge’s wife. Anne was to wait at home until the first opportunity offered

of sending her cheaply to Milan. There, among strangers, she was to be perfected in the actress's and the singer's art; then to return to England, and make the fortune of her family on the lyric stage.

Such were the prospects of the two as they sat together in the cabin of the Indiaman locked fast in each other's arms, and crying bitterly. The whispered farewell talk exchanged between them—exaggerated and impulsive as girls' talk is apt to be—came honestly, in each case, straight from the heart.

"Blanche! you may be married in India. Make your husband bring you back to England."

"Anne! you may take a dislike to the stage. Come out to India if you do."

"In England or out of England, married or not married, we will meet, darling—if it's years hence—with all the old love between us; friends who help each other, sisters who trust each other, for life! Vow it, Blanche!"

"I vow it, Anne!"

"With all your heart and soul?"

"With all my heart and soul!"

The sails were spread to the wind, and the ship began to move in the water. It was necessary to appeal to the captain's authority before the girls could be parted. The captain interfered gently and firmly. "Come, my dear," he said, putting his arm round Anne; "you won't mind *me!* I have got a daughter of my own." Anne's head fell on the sailor's shoulder. He put her, with his own hands, into the shore-boat alongside. In five minutes more the ship had gathered way; the boat was at the landing-stage—and the

girls had seen the last of each other for many a long year to come.

This was in the summer of eighteen hundred and thirty-one.

II.

Twenty-four years later—in the summer of eighteen hundred and fifty-five—there was a villa at Hampstead to be let, furnished.

The house was still occupied by the persons who desired to let it. On the evening on which this scene opens a lady and two gentlemen were seated at the dinner-table. The lady had reached the mature age of forty-two. She was still a rarely beautiful woman. Her husband, some years younger than herself, faced her at the table, sitting silent and constrained, and never, even by accident, looking at his wife. The third person was a guest. The husband’s name was Vanborough. The guest’s name was Kendrew.

It was the end of the dinner. The fruit and the wine were on the table. Mr. Vanborough pushed the bottles in silence to Mr. Kendrew. The lady of the house looked round at the servant who was waiting, and said, “Tell the children to come in.”

The door opened, and a girl twelve years old entered, lending by the hand a younger girl of five. They were both prettily dressed in white, with sashes of the same shade of light blue. But there was no family resemblance between them. The elder girl was frail and delicate, with a pale, sensitive face. The younger was light and florid, with round red cheeks and bright, saucy eyes—a charming little picture of happiness and health.

Mr. Kendrew looked inquiringly at the youngest of the two girls.

“Here is a young lady,” he said, “who is a total stranger to me.”

“If you had not been a total stranger yourself for a whole year past,” answered Mrs. Vanborough, “you would never have made that confession. This is little Blanche—the only child of the dearest friend I have. When Blanche’s mother and I last saw each other we were two poor school-girls beginning the world. My friend went to India, and married there late in life. You may have heard of her husband—the famous Indian officer, Sir Thomas Lundie? Yes: ‘the rich Sir Thomas,’ as you call him. Lady Lundie is now on her way back to England, for the first time since she left it—I am afraid to say how many years since. I expected her yesterday; I expect her to-day—she may come at any moment. We exchanged promises to meet, in the ship that took her to India—‘vows’ we called them in the dear old times. Imagine how changed we shall find each other when we *do* meet again at last!”

“In the mean time,” said Mr. Kendrew, “your friend appears to have sent you her little daughter to represent her? It’s a long journey for so young a traveler.”

“A journey ordered by the doctors in India a year since,” rejoined Mrs. Vanborough. “They said Blanche’s health required English air. Sir Thomas was ill at the time, and his wife couldn’t leave him. She had to send the child to England, and who should she send her to but me? Look at her now, and say if the English air hasn’t agreed with her! We two mothers, Mr. Kendrew, seem literally to live again in

our children. I have an only child. My friend has an only child. My daughter is little Anne—as *I* was. My friend's daughter is little Blanche—as *she* was. And, to crown it all, those two girls have taken the same fancy to each other which we took to each other in the by-gone days at school. One has often heard of hereditary hatred. Is there such a thing as hereditary love as well?"

Before the guest could answer, his attention was claimed by the master of the house.

"Kendrew," said Mr. Vanborough, "when you have had enough of domestic sentiment, suppose you take a glass of wine?"

The words were spoken with undisguised contempt of tone and manner. Mrs. Vanborough's color rose. She waited, and controlled the momentary irritation. When she spoke to her husband it was evidently with a wish to soothe and conciliate him.

"I am afraid, my dear, you are not well this evening?"

"I shall be better when those children have done clattering with their knives and forks."

The girls were peeling fruit. The younger one went on. The elder stopped, and looked at her mother. Mrs. Vanborough beckoned to Blanche to come to her, and pointed toward the French window opening to the floor.

"Would you like to eat your fruit in the garden, Blanche?"

"Yes," said Blanche, "if Anne will go with me."

Anne rose at once, and the two girls went away together into the garden, hand in hand. On their departure Mr. Kendrew wisely started a new subject. He referred to the letting of the house.

“The loss of the garden will be a sad loss to those two young ladies,” he said. “It really seems to be a pity that you should be giving up this pretty place.”

“Leaving the house is not the worst of the sacrifice,” answered Mrs. Vanborough. “If John finds Hampstead too far for him from London, of course we must move. The only hardship that I complain of is the hardship of having the house to let.”

Mr. Vanborough looked across the table, as ungraciously as possible, at his wife.

“What have *you* to do with it?” he asked.

Mrs. Vanborough tried to clear the conjugal horizon b y a smile.

“My dear John,” she said, gently, “you forget that, while you are at business, I am here all day. I can’t help seeing the people who come to look at the house. Such people!” she continued, turning to Mr. Kendrew. “They distrust every thing, from the scraper at the door to the chimneys on the roof. They force their way in at all hours. They ask all sorts of impudent questions—and they show you plainly that they don’t mean to believe your answers, before you have time to make them. Some wretch of a woman says, ‘Do you think the drains are right?’—and sniffs suspiciously, before I can say Yes. Some brute of a man asks, ‘Are you quite sure this house is solidly built, ma’am?’—and jumps on the floor at the full stretch of his legs, without waiting for me to reply. Nobody believes in our gravel soil and our south aspect. Nobody wants any of our improvements. The moment they hear of John’s Artesian well, they look as if they never drank

water. And, if they happen to pass my poultry-yard, they instantly lose all appreciation of the merits of a fresh egg!”

Mr. Kendrew laughed. “I have been through it all in my time,” he said. “The people who want to take a house are the born enemies of the people who want to let a house. Odd—isn’t it, Vanborough?”

Mr. Vanborough’s sullen humor resisted his friend as obstinately as it had resisted his wife.

“I dare say,” he answered. “I wasn’t listening.”

This time the tone was almost brutal. Mrs. Vanborough looked at her husband with unconcealed surprise and distress.

“John!” she said. “What *can* be the matter with you? Are you in pain?”

“A man may be anxious and worried, I suppose, without being actually in pain.”

“I am sorry to hear you are worried. Is it business?”

“Yes—business.”

“Consult Mr. Kendrew.”

“I am waiting to consult him.”

Mrs. Vanborough rose immediately. “Ring, dear,” she said, “when you want coffee.” As she passed her husband she stopped and laid her hand tenderly on his forehead. “I wish I could smooth out that frown!” she whispered. Mr. Vanborough impatiently shook his head. Mrs. Vanborough sighed as she turned to the door. Her husband called to her before she could leave the room.

“Mind we are not interrupted!”

“I will do my best, John.” She looked at Mr. Kendrew, holding the door open for her; and resumed, with an effort,

her former lightness of tone. “But don’t forget our ‘born enemies!’ Somebody may come, even at this hour of the evening, who wants to see the house.”

The two gentlemen were left alone over their wine. There was a strong personal contrast between them. Mr. Vanborough was tall and dark—a dashing, handsome man; with an energy in his face which all the world saw; with an inbred falseness under it which only a special observer could detect. Mr. Kendrew was short and light—slow and awkward in manner, except when something happened to rouse him. Looking in *his* face, the world saw an ugly and undemonstrative little man. The special observer, penetrating under the surface, found a fine nature beneath, resting on a steady foundation of honor and truth.

Mr. Vanborough opened the conversation.

“If you ever marry,” he said, “don’t be such a fool, Kendrew, as I have been. Don’t take a wife from the stage.”

“If I could get such a wife as yours,” replied the other, “I would take her from the stage to-morrow. A beautiful woman, a clever woman, a woman of unblemished character, and a woman who truly loves you. Man alive! what do you want more?”

“I want a great deal more. I want a woman highly connected and highly bred—a woman who can receive the best society in England, and open her husband’s way to a position in the world.”

“A position in the world!” cried Mr. Kendrew. “Here is a man whose father has left him half a million of money—with the one condition annexed to it of taking his father’s place at the head of one of the greatest mercantile houses in

England. And he talks about a position, as if he was a junior clerk in his own office! What on earth does your ambition see, beyond what your ambition has already got?”

Mr. Vanborough finished his glass of wine, and looked his friend steadily in the face.

“My ambition,” he said, “sees a Parliamentary career, with a Peerage at the end of it—and with no obstacle in the way but my estimable wife.”

Mr. Kendrew lifted his hand warningly. “Don’t talk in that way,” he said. “If you’re joking—it’s a joke I don’t see. If you’re in earnest—you force a suspicion on me which I would rather not feel. Let us change the subject.”

“No! Let us have it out at once. What do you suspect?”

“I suspect you are getting tired of your wife.”

“She is forty-two, and I am thirty-five; and I have been married to her for thirteen years. You know all that—and you only suspect I am tired of her. Bless your innocence! Have you any thing more to say?”

“If you force me to it, I take the freedom of an old friend, and I say you are not treating her fairly. It’s nearly two years since you broke up your establishment abroad, and came to England on your father’s death. With the exception of myself, and one or two other friends of former days, you have presented your wife to nobody. Your new position has smoothed the way for you into the best society. You never take your wife with you. You go out as if you were a single man. I have reason to know that you are actually believed to be a single man, among these new acquaintances of yours, in more than one quarter. Forgive me for speaking my mind

bluntly—I say what I think. It’s unworthy of you to keep your wife buried here, as if you were ashamed of her.”

“I *am* ashamed of her.”

“Vanborough!”

“Wait a little! you are not to have it all your own way, my good fellow. What are the facts? Thirteen years ago I fell in love with a handsome public singer, and married her. My father was angry with me; and I had to go and live with her abroad. It didn’t matter, abroad. My father forgave me on his death-bed, and I had to bring her home again. It does matter, at home. I find myself, with a great career opening before me, tied to a woman whose relations are (as you well know) the lowest of the low. A woman without the slightest distinction of manner, or the slightest aspiration beyond her nursery and her kitchen, her piano and her books. Is *that* a wife who can help me to make my place in society?—who can smooth my way through social obstacles and political obstacles, to the House of Lords? By Jupiter! if ever there was a woman to be ‘buried’ (as you call it), that woman is my wife. And, what’s more, if you want the truth, it’s because I *can’t* bury her here that I’m going to leave this house. She has got a cursed knack of making acquaintances wherever she goes. She’ll have a circle of friends about her if I leave her in this neighborhood much longer. Friends who remember her as the famous opera-singer. Friends who will see her swindling scoundrel of a father (when my back is turned) coming drunk to the door to borrow money of her! I tell you, my marriage has wrecked my prospects. It’s no use talking to me of my wife’s virtues. She is a millstone round my neck, with all her virtues. If I had not been a born idiot I

should have waited, and married a woman who would have been of some use to me; a woman with high connections—”

Mr. Kendrew touched his host’s arm, and suddenly interrupted him.

“To come to the point,” he said—“a woman like Lady Jane Parnell.”

Mr. Vanborough started. His eyes fell, for the first time, before the eyes of his friend.

“What do you know about Lady Jane?” he asked.

“Nothing. I don’t move in Lady Jane’s world—but I do go sometimes to the opera. I saw you with her last night in her box; and I heard what was said in the stalls near me. You were openly spoken of as the favored man who was singled out from the rest by Lady Jane. Imagine what would happen if your wife heard that! You are wrong, Vanborough—you are in every way wrong. You alarm, you distress, you disappoint me. I never sought this explanation—but now it has come, I won’t shrink from it. Reconsider your conduct; reconsider what you have said to me—or you count me no longer among your friends. No! I want no farther talk about it now. We are both getting hot—we may end in saying what had better have been left unsaid. Once more, let us change the subject. You wrote me word that you wanted me here to-day, because you needed my advice on a matter of some importance. What is it?”

Silence followed that question. Mr. Vanborough’s face betrayed signs of embarrassment. He poured himself out another glass of wine, and drank it at a draught before he replied.

“It’s not so easy to tell you what I want,” he said, “after the tone you have taken with me about my wife.”

Mr. Kendrew looked surprised.

“Is Mrs. Vanborough concerned in the matter?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Does she know about it?”

“No.”

“Have you kept the thing a secret out of regard for *her?*”

“Yes.”

“Have I any right to advise on it?”

“You have the right of an old friend.”

“Then, why not tell me frankly what it is?”

There was another moment of embarrassment on Mr. Vanborough’s part.

“It will come better,” he answered, “from a third person, whom I expect here every minute. He is in possession of all the facts—and he is better able to state them than I am.”

“Who is the person?”

“My friend, Delamayn.”

“Your lawyer?”

“Yes—the junior partner in the firm of Delamayn, Hawke, and Delamayn. Do you know him?”

“I am acquainted with him. His wife’s family were friends of mine before he married. I don’t like him.”

“You’re rather hard to please to-day! Delamayn is a rising man, if ever there was one yet. A man with a career before him, and with courage enough to pursue it. He is going to leave the Firm, and try his luck at the Bar. Every body says he will do great things. What’s your objection to him?”

“I have no objection whatever. We meet with people occasionally whom we dislike without knowing why. Without knowing why, I dislike Mr. Delamayn.”

“Whatever you do you must put up with him this evening. He will be here directly.”

He was there at that moment. The servant opened the door, and announced—“Mr. Delamayn.”

III.

Externally speaking, the rising solicitor, who was going to try his luck at the Bar, looked like a man who was going to succeed. His hard, hairless face, his watchful gray eyes, his thin, resolute lips, said plainly, in so many words, “I mean to get on in the world; and, if you are in my way, I mean to get on at your expense.” Mr. Delamayn was habitually polite to every body—but he had never been known to say one unnecessary word to his dearest friend. A man of rare ability; a man of unblemished honor (as the code of the world goes); but not a man to be taken familiarly by the hand. You would never have borrowed money of him—but you would have trusted him with untold gold. Involved in private and personal troubles, you would have hesitated at asking him to help you. Involved in public and producible troubles, you would have said, Here is my man. Sure to push his way—nobody could look at him and doubt it—sure to push his way.

“Kendrew is an old friend of mine,” said Mr. Vanborough, addressing himself to the lawyer. “Whatever you have to say to *me* you may say before *him.* Will you have some wine?”

“No—thank you.”

“Have you brought any news?”

“Yes.”

“Have you got the written opinions of the two barristers?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“‘Because nothing of the sort is necessary. If the facts of the case are correctly stated there is not the slightest doubt about the law.”

With that reply Mr. Delamayn took a written paper from his pocket, and spread it out on the table before him.

“What is that?” asked Mr. Vanborough.

“The case relating to your marriage.”

Mr. Kendrew started, and showed the first tokens of interest in the proceedings which had escaped him yet. Mr. Delamayn looked at him for a moment, and went on.

“The case,” he resumed, “as originally stated by you, and taken down in writing by our head-clerk.”

Mr. Vanborough’s temper began to show itself again.

“What have we got to do with that now?” he asked. “You have made your inquiries to prove the correctness of my statement—haven’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And you have found out that I am right?”

“I have found out that you are right—if the case is right. I wish to be sure that no mistake has occurred between you and the clerk. This is a very important matter. I am going to take the responsibility of giving an opinion which may be followed by serious consequences; and I mean to assure myself that the opinion is given on a sound basis, first. I

have some questions to ask you. Don’t be impatient, if you please. They won’t take long.”

He referred to the manuscript, and put the first question.

“You were married at Inchmallock, in Ireland, Mr. Vanborough, thirteen years since?”

“Yes.”

“Your wife—then Miss Anne Silvester—was a Roman Catholic?”

“Yes.”

“Her father and mother were Roman Catholics?”

“They were.”

“*Your* father and mother were Protestants? and *you* were baptized and brought up in the Church of England?”

“All right!”

“Miss Anne Silvester felt, and expressed, a strong repugnance to marrying you, because you and she belonged to different religious communities?”

“She did.”

“You got over her objection by consenting to become a Roman Catholic, like herself?”

“It was the shortest way with her and it didn’t matter to *me*.”

“You were formally received into the Roman Catholic Church?”

“I went through the whole ceremony.”

“Abroad or at home?”

“Abroad.”

“How long was it before the date of your marriage?”

“Six weeks before I was married.”

Referring perpetually to the paper in his hand, Mr. Delamayn was especially careful in comparing that last answer with the answer given to the head-clerk.

“Quite right,” he said, and went on with his questions.

“The priest who married you was one Ambrose Redman—a young man recently appointed to his clerical duties?”

“Yes.”

“Did he ask if you were both Roman Catholics?”

“Yes.”

“Did he ask any thing more?”

“No.”

“Are you sure he never inquired whether you had both been Catholics *for more than one year before you came to him to be married?*”

“I am certain of it.”

“He must have forgotten that part of his duty—or being only a beginner, he may well have been ignorant of it altogether. Did neither you nor the lady think of informing him on the point?”

“Neither I nor the lady knew there was any necessity for informing him.”

Mr. Delamayn folded up the manuscript, and put it back in his pocket.

“Right,” he said, “in every particular.”

Mr. Vanborough’s swarthy complexion slowly turned pale. He cast one furtive glance at Mr. Kendrew, and turned away again.

“Well,” he said to the lawyer, “now for your opinion! What is the law?”

“The law,” answered Mr. Delamayn, “is beyond all doubt or dispute. Your marriage with Miss Anne Silvester is no marriage at all.”

Mr. Kendrew started to his feet.

“What do you mean?” he asked, sternly.

The rising solicitor lifted his eyebrows in polite surprise. If Mr. Kendrew wanted information, why should Mr. Kendrew ask for it in that way? “Do you wish me to go into the law of the case?” he inquired.

“I do.”

Mr. Delamayn stated the law, as that law still stands—to the disgrace of the English Legislature and the English Nation.

“By the Irish Statute of George the Second,” he said, “every marriage celebrated by a Popish priest between two Protestants, or between a Papist and any person who has been a Protestant within twelve months before the marriage, is declared null and void. And by two other Acts of the same reign such a celebration of marriage is made a felony on the part of the priest. The clergy in Ireland of other religious denominations have been relieved from this law. But it still remains in force so far as the Roman Catholic priesthood is concerned.”

“Is such a state of things possible in the age we live in!” exclaimed Mr. Kendrew.

Mr. Delamayn smiled. He had outgrown the customary illusions as to the age we live in.

“There are other instances in which the Irish marriage-law presents some curious anomalies of its own,” he went on. “It is felony, as I have just told you, for a Roman Catholic

priest to celebrate a marriage which may be lawfully celebrated by a parochial clergyman, a Presbyterian mini ster, and a Non-conformist minister. It is also felony (by another law) on the part of a parochial clergyman to celebrate a marriage that may be lawfully celebrated by a Roman Catholic priest. And it is again felony (by yet another law) for a Presbyterian minister and a Non-conformist minister to celebrate a marriage which may be lawfully celebrated by a clergyman of the Established Church. An odd state of things. Foreigners might possibly think it a scandalous state of things. In this country we don't appear to mind it. Returning to the present case, the results stand thus: Mr. Vanborough is a single man; Mrs. Vanborough is a single woman; their child is illegitimate, and the priest, Ambrose Redman, is liable to be tried, and punished, as a felon, for marrying them."

"An infamous law!" said Mr. Kendrew.

"It *is* the law," returned Mr. Delamayn, as a sufficient answer to him.

Thus far not a word had escaped the master of the house. He sat with his lips fast closed and his eyes riveted on the table, thinking.

Mr. Kendrew turned to him, and broke the silence.

"Am I to understand," he asked, "that the advice you wanted from me related to *this?*"

"Yes."

"You mean to tell me that, foreseeing the present interview and the result to which it might lead, you felt any doubt as to the course you were bound to take? Am I really to understand that you hesitate to set this dreadful mistake

right, and to make the woman who is your wife in the sight of Heaven your wife in the sight of the law?”

“If you choose to put it in that light,” said Mr. Vanborough; “if you won’t consider—”

“I want a plain answer to my question—‘yes, or no.’”

“Let me speak, will you! A man has a right to explain himself, I suppose?”

Mr. Kendrew stopped him by a gesture of disgust.

“I won’t trouble you to explain yourself,” he said. “I prefer to leave the house. You have given me a lesson, Sir, which I shall not forget. I find that one man may have known another from the days when they were both boys, and may have seen nothing but the false surface of him in all that time. I am ashamed of having ever been your friend. You are a stranger to me from this moment.”

With those words he left the room.

“That is a curiously hot-headed man,” remarked Mr. Delamayn. “If you will allow me, I think I’ll change my mind. I’ll have a glass of wine.”

Mr. Vanborough rose to his feet without replying, and took a turn in the room impatiently. Scoundrel as he was—in intention, if not yet in act—the loss of the oldest friend he had in the world staggered him for the moment.

“This is an awkward business, Delamayn,” he said. “What would you advise me to do?”

Mr. Delamayn shook his head, and sipped his claret.

“I decline to advise you,” he answered. “I take no responsibility, beyond the responsibility of stating the law as it stands, in your case.”

Mr. Vanborough sat down again at the table, to consider the alternative of asserting or not asserting his freedom from the marriage tie. He had not had much time thus far for turning the matter over in his mind. But for his residence on the Continent the question of the flaw in his marriage might no doubt have been raised long since. As things were, the question had only taken its rise in a chance conversation with Mr. Delamayn in the summer of that year.

For some minutes the lawyer sat silent, sipping his wine, and the husband sat silent, thinking his own thoughts. The first change that came over the scene was produced by the appearance of a servant in the dining-room.

Mr. Vanborough looked up at the man with a sudden outbreak of anger.

“What do you want here?”

The man was a well-bred English servant. In other words, a human machine, doing its duty impenetrably when it was once wound up. He had his words to speak, and he spoke them.

“There is a lady at the door, Sir, who wishes to see the house.”

“The house is not to be seen at this time of the evening.”

The machine had a message to deliver, and delivered it.

“The lady desired me to present her apologies, Sir. I was to tell you she was much pressed for time. This was the last house on the house agent’s list, and her coachman is stupid about finding his way in strange places.”

“Hold your tongue, and tell the lady to go to the devil!”

Mr. Delamayn interfered—partly in the interests of his client, partly in the interests of propriety.

“You attach some importance, I think, to letting this house as soon as possible?” he said.

“Of course I do!”

“Is it wise—on account of a momentary annoyance—to lose an opportunity of laying your hand on a tenant?”

“Wise or not, it’s an infernal nuisance to be disturbed by a stranger.”

“Just as you please. I don’t wish to interfere. I only wish to say—in case you are thinking of my convenience as your guest—that it will be no nuisance to *me.*”

The servant impenetrably waited. Mr. Vanborough impatiently gave way.

“Very well. Let her in. Mind, if she comes here, she’s only to look into the room, and go out again. If she wants to ask questions, she must go to the agent.”

Mr. Delamayn interfered once more, in the interests, this time, of the lady of the house.

“Might it not be desirable,” he suggested, “to consult Mrs. Vanborough before you quite decide?”

“Where’s your mistress?”

“In the garden, or the paddock, Sir—I am not sure which.”

“We can’t send all over the grounds in search of her. Tell the house-maid, and show the lady in.”

The servant withdrew. Mr. Delamayn helped himself to a second glass of wine.

“Excellent claret,” he said. “Do you get it direct from Bordeaux?”

There was no answer. Mr. Vanborough had returned to the contemplation of the alternative between freeing

himself or not freeing himself from the marriage tie. One of his elbows was on the table, he bit fiercely at his finger-nails. He muttered between his teeth, “What am I to do?”

A sound of rustling silk made itself gently audible in the passage outside. The door opened, and the lady who had come to see the house appeared in the dining-room.

IV.

She was tall and elegant; beautifully dressed, in the happiest combination of simplicity and splendor. A light summer veil hung over her face. She lifted it, and made her apologies for disturbing the gentlemen over their wine, with the unaffected ease and grace of a highly-bred woman.

“Pray accept my excuses for this intrusion. I am ashamed to disturb you. One look at the room will be quite enough.”

Thus far she had addressed Mr. Delamayn, who happened to be nearest to her. Looking round the room her eye fell on Mr. Vanborough. She started, with a loud exclamation of astonishment. *“You!”* she said. “Good Heavens! who would have thought of meeting *you* here?”

Mr. Vanborough, on his side, stood petrified.

“Lady Jane!” he exclaimed. “Is it possible?”

He barely looked at her while she spoke. His eyes wandered guiltily toward the window which led into the garden. The situation was a terrible one—equally terrible if his wife discovered Lady Jane, or if Lady Jane discovered his wife. For the moment nobody was visible on the lawn. There was time, if the chance only offered—there was time for him to get the visitor out of the house. The visitor, innocent of all knowledge of the truth, gayly offered him her hand.