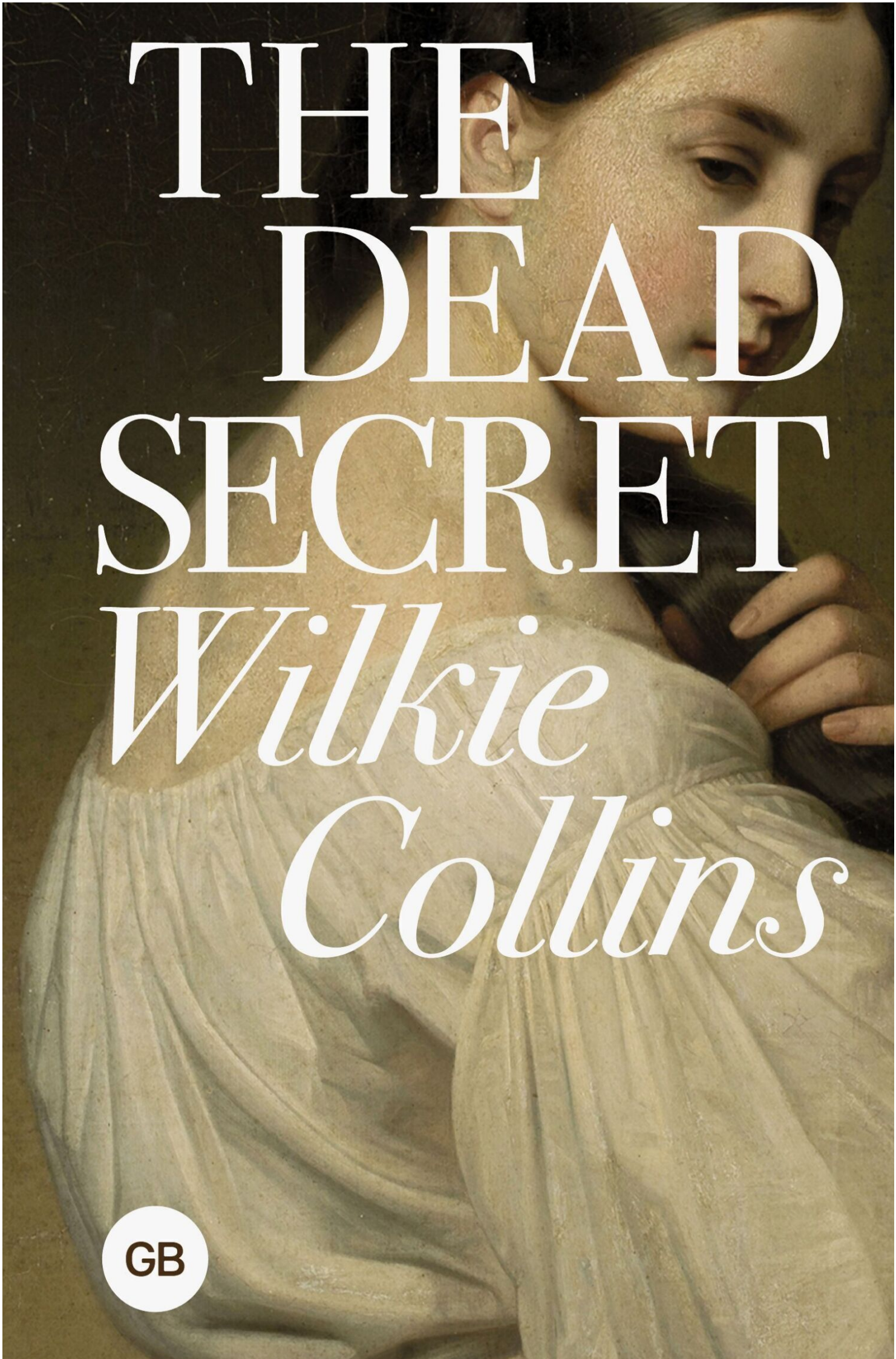

THE DEAD SECRET
Wilkie Collins
GB

Great Books

William Wilkie Collins

The Dead Secret / Тайна

«Издательство АСТ»
1965

УДК 821.111-31
ББК 84(4Вел)-44

Collins W.

The Dead Secret / Тайна / W. Collins — «Издательство АСТ», 1965 — (Great Books)

ISBN 978-5-17-174882-1

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Уилки Коллинз
The Dead Secret

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Book I

Chapter I
The Twenty-third of August, 1829

“Will she last out the night, I wonder?”

“Look at the clock, Mathew.”

“Ten minutes past twelve! She has lasted the night out. She has lived, Robert, to see ten minutes of the new day.”

These words were spoken in the kitchen of a large country-house situated on the west coast of Cornwall. The speakers were two of the men-servants composing the establishment of Captain Treverton, an officer in the navy, and the eldest male representative of an old Cornish family. Both the servants communicated with each other restrainedly, in whispers – sitting close together, and looking round expectantly toward the door whenever the talk flagged between them.

“It's an awful thing,” said the elder of the men, “for us two to be alone here, at this dark time, counting out the minutes that our mistress has left to live!”

“Robert,” said the other, “you have been in the service here since you were a boy – did you ever hear that our mistress was a play-actress when our master married her?”

“How came you to know that?” inquired the elder servant, sharply.

“Hush!” cried the other, rising quickly from his chair.

A bell rang in the passage outside.

“Is that for one of us?” asked Mathew.

“Can't you tell, by the sound, which is which of those bells yet?” exclaimed Robert, contemptuously. “That bell is for Sarah Leeson. Go out into the passage and look.”

The younger servant took a candle and obeyed. When he opened the kitchen-door, a long row of bells met his eye on the wall opposite. Above each of them was painted, in neat black letters, the distinguishing title of the servant whom it was specially intended to summon. The row of letters began with Housekeeper and Butler, and ended with Kitchen-maid and Footman's Boy.

Looking along the bells, Mathew easily discovered that one of them was still in motion. Above it were the words Lady's-Maid. Observing this, he passed quickly along the passage, and knocked at an old-fashioned oak door at the end of it. No answer being given, he opened the door and looked into the room. It was dark and empty.

“Sarah is not in the housekeeper's room,” said Mathew, returning to his fellow-servant in the kitchen.

“She is gone to her own room, then,” rejoined the other. “Go up and tell her that she is wanted by her mistress.”

The bell rang again as Mathew went out.

“Quick! – quick!” cried Robert. “Tell her she is wanted directly. Wanted,” he continued to himself in lower tones, “perhaps for the last time!”

Mathew ascended three flights of stairs – passed half-way down a long arched gallery – and knocked at another old-fashioned oak door. This time the signal was answered. A low, clear, sweet voice, inside the room, inquired who was waiting without? In a few hasty words Mathew told his errand. Before he had done speaking the door was quietly and quickly opened, and Sarah Leeson confronted him on the threshold, with her candle in her hand.

Not tall, not handsome, not in her first youth – shy and irresolute in manner – simple in dress to the utmost limits of plainness – the lady's-maid, in spite of all these disadvantages, was a woman

whom it was impossible to look at without a feeling of curiosity, if not of interest. Few men, at first sight of her, could have resisted the desire to find out who she was; few would have been satisfied with receiving for answer, She is Mrs. Treverton's maid; few would have refrained from the attempt to extract some secret information for themselves from her face and manner; and none, not even the most patient and practiced of observers, could have succeeded in discovering more than that she must have passed through the ordeal of some great suffering at some former period of her life. Much in her manner, and more in her face, said plainly and sadly: I am the wreck of something that you might once have liked to see; a wreck that can never be repaired – that must drift on through life unnoticed, unguided, unpitied – drift till the fatal shore is touched, and the waves of Time have swallowed up these broken relics of me forever. This was the story that was told in Sarah Leeson's face – this, and no more.

No two men interpreting that story for themselves, would probably have agreed on the nature of the suffering which this woman had undergone. It was hard to say, at the outset, whether the past pain that had set its ineffaceable mark on her had been pain of the body or pain of the mind. But whatever the nature of the affliction she had suffered, the traces it had left were deeply and strikingly visible in every part of her face.

Her cheeks had lost their roundness and their natural color; her lips, singularly flexible in movement and delicate in form, had faded to an unhealthy paleness; her eyes, large and black and overshadowed by unusually thick lashes, had contracted an anxious startled look, which never left them, and which piteously expressed the painful acuteness of her sensibility, the inherent timidity of her disposition. So far, the marks which sorrow or sickness had set on her were the marks common to most victims of mental or physical suffering. The one extraordinary personal deterioration which she had undergone consisted in the unnatural change that had passed over the color of her hair. It was as thick and soft, it grew as gracefully, as the hair of a young girl; but it was as gray as the hair of an old woman. It seemed to contradict, in the most startling manner, every personal assertion of youth that still existed in her face. With all its haggardness and paleness, no one could have looked at it and supposed for a moment that it was the face of an elderly woman. Wan as they might be, there was not a wrinkle in her cheeks. Her eyes, viewed apart from their prevailing expression of uneasiness and timidity, still preserved that bright, clear moisture which is never seen in the eyes of the old. The skin about her temples was as delicately smooth as the skin of a child. These and other physical signs which never mislead, showed that she was still, as to years, in the very prime of her life. Sickly and sorrow-stricken as she was, she looked, from the eyes downward, a woman who had barely reached thirty years of age. From the eyes upward, the effect of her abundant gray hair, seen in connection with her face, was not simply incongruous – it was absolutely startling; so startling as to make it no paradox to say that she would have looked most natural, most like herself, if her hair had been dyed. In her case, Art would have seemed to be the truth, because Nature looked like falsehood.

What shock had stricken her hair, in the very maturity of its luxuriance, with the hue of an unnatural old age? Was it a serious illness, or a dreadful grief, that had turned her gray in the prime of her womanhood? That question had often been agitated among her fellow-servants, who were all struck by the peculiarities of her personal appearance, and rendered a little suspicious of her, as well, by an inveterate habit that she had of talking to herself. Inquire as they might, however, their curiosity was always baffled. Nothing more could be discovered than that Sarah Leeson was, in the common phrase, touchy on the subject of her gray hair and her habit of talking to herself, and that Sarah Leeson's mistress had long since forbidden every one, from her husband downward, to ruffle her maid's tranquillity by inquisitive questions.

She stood for an instant speechless, on that momentous morning of the twenty-third of August, before the servant who summoned her to her mistress's death-bed – the light of the candle flaring brightly over her large, startled, black eyes, and the luxuriant, unnatural gray hair above them. She stood a moment silent – her hand trembling while she held the candlestick, so that the extinguisher

lying loose in it rattled incessantly – then thanked the servant for calling her. The trouble and fear in her voice, as she spoke, seemed to add to its sweetness; the agitation of her manner took nothing away from its habitual gentleness, its delicate, winning, feminine restraint. Mathew, who, like the other servants, secretly distrusted and disliked her for differing from the ordinary pattern of professed lady's-maids, was, on this particular occasion, so subdued by her manner and her tone as she thanked him, that he offered to carry her candle for her to the door of her mistress's bed-chamber. She shook her head, and thanked him again, then passed before him quickly on her way out of the gallery.

The room in which Mrs. Treverton lay dying was on the floor beneath. Sarah hesitated twice before she knocked at the door. It was opened by Captain Treverton.

The instant she saw her master she started back from him. If she had dreaded a blow she could hardly have drawn away more suddenly, or with an expression of greater alarm. There was nothing in Captain Treverton's face to warrant the suspicion of ill-treatment, or even of harsh words. His countenance was kind, hearty, and open; and the tears were still trickling down it which he had shed by his wife's bedside.

"Go in," he said, turning away his face. "She does not wish the nurse to attend; she only wishes for you. Call me if the doctor —" His voice faltered, and he hurried away without attempting to finish the sentence.

Sarah Leeson, instead of entering her mistress's room, stood looking after her master attentively, with her pale cheeks turned to a deathly whiteness – with an eager, doubting, questioning terror in her eyes. When he had disappeared round the corner of the gallery, she listened for a moment outside the door of the sick-room – whispered affrightedly to herself, "Can she have told him?" – then opened the door, with a visible effort to recover her self-control; and, after lingering suspiciously on the threshold for a moment, went in.

Mrs. Treverton's bed-chamber was a large, lofty room, situated in the western front of the house, and consequently overlooking the sea-view. The night-light burning by the bedside displayed rather than dispelled the darkness in the corners of the room. The bed was of the old-fashioned pattern, with heavy hangings and thick curtains drawn all round it. Of the other objects in the chamber, only those of the largest and most solid kind were prominent enough to be tolerably visible in the dim light. The cabinets, the wardrobe, the full-length looking-glass, the high-backed arm-chair, these, with the great shapeless bulk of the bed itself, towered up heavily and gloomily into view. Other objects were all merged together in the general obscurity. Through the open window, opened to admit the fresh air of the new morning after the sultriness of the August night, there poured monotonously into the room the dull, still, distant roaring of the surf on the sandy coast. All outer noises were hushed at that first dark hour of the new day. Inside the room the one audible sound was the slow, toilsome breathing of the dying woman, raising itself in its mortal frailness, awfully and distinctly, even through the far thunder-breathing from the bosom of the everlasting sea.

"Mistress," said Sarah Leeson, standing close to the curtains, but not withdrawing them, "my master has left the room, and has sent me here in his place."

"Light! – give me more light."

The feebleness of mortal sickness was in the voice; but the accent of the speaker sounded resolute even yet – doubly resolute by contrast with the hesitation of the tones in which Sarah had spoken. The strong nature of the mistress and the weak nature of the maid came out, even in that short interchange of words spoken through the curtain of a death-bed.

Sarah lit two candles with a wavering hand – placed them hesitatingly on a table by the bedside – waited for a moment, looking all round her with suspicious timidity – then undrew the curtains.

The disease of which Mrs. Treverton was dying was one of the most terrible of all the maladies that afflict humanity, one to which women are especially subject, and one which undermines life without, in most cases, showing any remarkable traces of its corroding progress in the face. No uninstructed person, looking at Mrs. Treverton when her attendant undrew the bed-curtain, could

possibly have imagined that she was past all help that mortal skill could offer to her. The slight marks of illness in her face, the inevitable changes in the grace and roundness of its outline, were rendered hardly noticeable by the marvelous preservation of her complexion in all the light and delicacy of its first girlish beauty. There lay her face on the pillow – tenderly framed in by the rich lace of her cap, softly crowned by her shining brown hair – to all outward appearance, the face of a beautiful woman recovering from a slight illness, or reposing after unusual fatigue. Even Sarah Leeson, who had watched her all through her malady, could hardly believe, as she looked at her mistress, that the Gates of Life had closed behind her, and that the beckoning hand of Death was signing to her already from the Gates of the Grave.

Some dog's-eared books in paper covers lay on the counterpane of the bed. As soon as the curtain was drawn aside Mrs. Treverton ordered her attendant by a gesture to remove them. They were plays, underscored in certain places by ink lines, and marked with marginal annotations referring to entrances, exits, and places on the stage. The servants, talking down stairs of their mistress's occupation before her marriage, had not been misled by false reports. Their master, after he had passed the prime of life, had, in very truth, taken his wife from the obscure stage of a country theatre, when little more than two years had elapsed since her first appearance in public. The dog's-eared old plays had been once her treasured dramatic library; she had always retained a fondness for them from old associations; and, during the latter part of her illness, they had remained on her bed for days and days together.

Having put away the plays, Sarah went back to her mistress; and, with more of dread and bewilderment in her face than grief, opened her lips to speak. Mrs. Treverton held up her hand, as a sign that she had another order to give.

“Bolt the door,” she said, in the same enfeebled voice, but with the same accent of resolution which had so strikingly marked her first request to have more light in the room. “Bolt the door. Let no one in, till I give you leave.”

“No one?” repeated Sarah, faintly. “Not the doctor? not even my master?”

“Not the doctor – not even your master,” said Mrs. Treverton, and pointed to the door. The hand was weak; but even in that momentary action of it there was no mistaking the gesture of command.

Sarah bolted the door, returned irresolutely to the bedside, fixed her large, eager, startled eyes inquiringly on her mistress's face, and, suddenly bending over her, said in a whisper:

“Have you told my master?”

“No,” was the answer. “I sent for him, to tell him – I tried hard to speak the words – it shook me to my very soul, only to think how I should best break it to him – I am so fond of him! I love him so dearly! But I should have spoken in spite of that, if he had not talked of the child. Sarah! he did nothing but talk of the child – and that silenced me.”

Sarah, with a forgetfulness of her station which might have appeared extraordinary even in the eyes of the most lenient of mistresses, flung herself back in a chair when the first word of Mrs. Treverton's reply was uttered, clasped her trembling hands over her face, and groaned to herself, “Oh, what will happen! what will happen now!”

Mrs. Treverton's eyes had softened and moistened when she spoke of her love for her husband. She lay silent for a few minutes; the working of some strong emotion in her being expressed by her quick, hard, labored breathing, and by the painful contraction of her eyebrows. Ere long, she turned her head uneasily toward the chair in which her attendant was sitting, and spoke again – this time in a voice which had sunk to a whisper.

“Look for my medicine,” said she; “I want it.”

Sarah started up, and with the quick instinct of obedience brushed away the tears that were rolling fast over her cheeks.

“The doctor,” she said. “Let me call the doctor.”

“No! The medicine – look for the medicine.”

“Which bottle? The opiate —”

“No. Not the opiate. The other.”

Sarah took a bottle from the table, and looking attentively at the written direction on the label, said that it was not yet time to take that medicine again.

“Give me the bottle.”

“Oh, pray don't ask me. Pray wait. The doctor said it was as bad as dram-drinking, if you took too much.”

Mrs. Treverton's clear gray eyes began to flash; the rosy flush deepened on her cheeks; the commanding hand was raised again, by an effort, from the counterpane on which it lay.

“Take the cork out of the bottle,” she said, “and give it to me. I want strength. No matter whether I die in an hour's time or a week's. Give me the bottle.”

“No, no – not the bottle!” said Sarah, giving it up, nevertheless, under the influence of her mistress's look. “There are two doses left. Wait, pray wait till I get a glass.”

She turned again toward the table. At the same instant Mrs. Treverton raised the bottle to her lips, drained it of its contents, and flung it from her on the bed.

“She has killed herself!” cried Sarah, running in terror to the door.

“Stop!” said the voice from the bed, more resolute than ever, already. “Stop! Come back and prop me up higher on the pillows.”

Sarah put her hand on the bolt.

“Come back!” reiterated Mrs. Treverton. “While there is life in me, I will be obeyed. Come back!” The color began to deepen perceptibly all over her face, and the light to grow brighter in her widely opened eyes.

Sarah came back; and with shaking hands added one more to the many pillows which supported the dying woman's head and shoulders. While this was being done the bed-clothes became a little discomposed. Mrs. Treverton shuddered, and drew them up to their former position, close round her neck.

“Did you unbolt the door?” she asked.

“No.”

“I forbid you to go near it again. Get my writing-case, and the pen and ink, from the cabinet near the window.”

Sarah went to the cabinet and opened it; then stopped, as if some sudden suspicion had crossed her mind, and asked what the writing materials were wanted for.

“Bring them, and you will see.”

The writing-case, with a sheet of note-paper on it, was placed upon Mrs. Treverton's knees; the pen was dipped into the ink, and given to her; she paused, closed her eyes for a minute, and sighed heavily; then began to write, saying to her waiting-maid, as the pen touched the paper —”Look.”

Sarah peered anxiously over her shoulder, and saw the pen slowly and feebly form these three words:*To my Husband*.

“Oh, no! no! For God's sake, don't write it!” she cried, catching at her mistress's hand – but suddenly letting it go again the moment Mrs. Treverton looked at her.

The pen went on; and more slowly, more feebly, formed words enough to fill a line – then stopped. The letters of the last syllable were all blotted together.

“Don't!” reiterated Sarah, dropping on her knees at the bedside. “Don't write it to him if you can't tell it to him. Let me go on bearing what I have borne so long already. Let the Secret die with you and die with me, and be never known in this world – never, never, never!”

“The Secret must be told,” answered Mrs. Treverton. “My husband ought to know it, and must know it. I tried to tell him, and my courage failed me. I can not trust you to tell him, after I am gone. It must be written. Take you the pen; my sight is failing, my touch is dull. Take the pen, and write what I tell you.”

Sarah, instead of obeying, hid her face in the bed-cover, and wept bitterly.

“You have been with me ever since my marriage,” Mrs. Treverton went on. “You have been my friend more than my servant. Do you refuse my last request? You do! Fool! look up and listen to me. On your peril, refuse to take the pen. Write, or I shall not rest in my grave.*Write, or as true as there is a Heaven above us, I will come to you from the other world!*”

Sarah started to her feet with a faint scream.

“You make my flesh creep!” she whispered, fixing her eyes on her mistress's face with a stare of superstitious horror.

At the same instant, the overdose of the stimulating medicine began to affect Mrs. Treverton's brain. She rolled her head restlessly from side to side of the pillow – repeated vacantly a few lines from one of the old play-books which had been removed from her bed – and suddenly held out the pen to the servant, with a theatrical wave of the hand, and a glance upward at an imaginary gallery of spectators.

“Write!” she cried, with an awful mimicry of her old stage voice. “Write!” And the weak hand was waved again with a forlorn, feeble imitation of the old stage gesture.

Closing her fingers mechanically on the pen that was thrust between them, Sarah, with her eyes still expressing the superstitious terror which her mistress's words had aroused, waited for the next command. Some minutes elapsed before Mrs. Treverton spoke again. She still retained her senses sufficiently to be vaguely conscious of the effect which the medicine was producing on her, and to be desirous of combating its further progress before it succeeded in utterly confusing her ideas. She asked first for the smelling-bottle, next for some Eau de Cologne.

This last, poured onto her handkerchief and applied to her forehead, seemed to prove successful in partially clearing her faculties. Her eyes recovered their steady look of intelligence; and, when she again addressed her maid, reiterating the word “Write,” she was able to enforce the direction by beginning immediately to dictate in quiet, deliberate, determined tones. Sarah's tears fell fast; her lips murmured fragments of sentences in which entreaties, expressions of penitence, and exclamations of fear were all strangely mingled together; but she wrote on submissively, in wavering lines, until she had nearly filled the first two sides of the note-paper. Then Mrs. Treverton paused, looked the writing over, and, taking the pen, signed her name at the end of it. With this effort, her powers of resistance to the exciting effect of the medicine seemed to fail her again. The deep flush began to tinge her cheeks once more, and she spoke hurriedly and unsteadily when she handed the pen back to her maid.

“Sign!” she cried, beating her hand feebly on the bed-clothes. “Sign 'Sarah Leeson, witness.' No! – write 'Accomplice.' Take your share of it; I won't have it shifted on me. Sign, I insist on it! Sign as I tell you.”

Sarah obeyed; and Mrs. Treverton taking the paper from her, pointed to it solemnly, with a return of the stage gesture which had escaped her a little while back.

“You will give this to your master,” she said, “when I am dead; and you will answer any questions he puts to you as truly as if you were before the judgment-seat.”

Clasping her hands fast together, Sarah regarded her mistress, for the first time, with steady eyes, and spoke to her for the first time in steady tones.

“If I only knew that I was fit to die,” she said, “oh, how gladly I would change places with you!”

“Promise me that you will give the paper to your master,” repeated Mrs. Treverton. “Promise – no! I won't trust your promise – I'll have your oath. Get the Bible – the Bible the clergyman used when he was here this morning. Get it, or I shall not rest in my grave. Get it,*or I will come to you from the other world*.”

The mistress laughed as she reiterated that threat. The maid shuddered, as she obeyed the command which it was designed to impress on her.

“Yes, yes – the Bible the clergyman used,” continued Mrs. Treverton, vacantly, after the book had been produced. “The clergyman – a poor weak man – I frightened him, Sarah. He said, 'Are you at peace with all the world?' and I said, 'All but one.' You know who.”

“The Captain's brother? Oh, don't die at enmity with any body. Don't die at enmity even with*him,*” pleaded Sarah.

“The clergyman said so too,” murmured Mrs. Treverton, her eyes beginning to wander childishly round the room, her tones growing suddenly lower and more confused. “'You must forgive him,' the clergyman said. And I said, 'No, I forgive all the world, but not my husband's brother.' The clergyman got up from the bedside, frightened, Sarah. He talked about praying for me, and coming back. Will he come back?”

“Yes, yes,” answered Sarah. “He is a good man – he will come back – and oh! tell him that you forgive the Captain's brother! Those vile words he spoke of you when you were married will come home to him some day. Forgive him – forgive him before you die!”

Saying those words, she attempted to remove the Bible softly out of her mistress's sight. The action attracted Mrs. Treverton's attention, and roused her sinking faculties into observation of present things.

“Stop!” she cried, with a gleam of the old resolution flashing once more over the dying dimness of her eyes. She caught at Sarah's hand with a great effort, placed it on the Bible, and held it there. Her other hand wandered a little over the bed-clothes, until it encountered the written paper addressed to her husband. Her fingers closed on it, and a sigh of relief escaped her lips.

“Ah!” she said, “I know what I wanted the Bible for. I'm dying with all my senses about me, Sarah; you can't deceive me even yet.” She stopped again, smiled a little, whispered to herself rapidly, “Wait, wait, wait!” then added aloud, with the old stage voice and the old stage gesture: “No! I won't trust you on your promise. I'll have your oath. Kneel down. These are my last words in this world – disobey them if you dare!”

Sarah dropped on her knees by the bed. The breeze outside, strengthening just then with the slow advance of the morning, parted the window-curtains a little, and wafted a breath of its sweet fragrance joyously into the sick-room. The heavy beating hum of the distant surf came in at the same time, and poured out its unresting music in louder strains. Then the window-curtains fell to again heavily, the wavering flame of the candle grew steady once more, and the awful silence in the room sank deeper than ever.

“Swear!” said Mrs. Treverton. Her voice failed her when she had pronounced that one word. She struggled a little, recovered the power of utterance, and went on: “Swear that you will not destroy this paper after I am dead.”

Even while she pronounced these solemn words, even at that last struggle for life and strength, the ineradicable theatrical instinct showed, with a fearful inappropriateness, how firmly it kept its place in her mind. Sarah felt the cold hand that was still laid on hers lifted for a moment – saw it waving gracefully toward her – felt it descend again, and clasp her own hand with a trembling, impatient pressure. At that final appeal, she answered faintly,

“I swear it.”

“Swear that you will not take this paper away with you, if you leave the house, after I am dead.”

Again Sarah paused before she answered – again the trembling pressure made itself felt on her hand, but more weakly this time – again the words dropped affrightedly from her lips —

“I swear it.”

“Swear!” Mrs. Treverton began for the third time. Her voice failed her once more; and she struggled vainly to regain the command over it.

Sarah looked up, and saw signs of convulsion beginning to disfigure the white face – saw the fingers of the white, delicate hand getting crooked as they reached over toward the table on which the medicine-bottles were placed.

“You drank it all,” she cried, starting to her feet, as she comprehended the meaning of that gesture. “Mistress, dear mistress, you drank it all – there is nothing but the opiate left. Let me go – let me go and call —”

A look from Mrs. Treverton stopped her before she could utter another word. The lips of the dying woman were moving rapidly. Sarah put her ear close to them. At first she heard nothing but panting, quick-drawn breaths – then a few broken words mingled confusedly with them:

“I hav'n't done – you must swear – close, close, come close – a third thing – your master – swear to give it —”

The last words died away very softly. The lips that had been forming them so laboriously parted on a sudden and closed again no more. Sarah sprang to the door, opened it, and called into the passage for help; then ran back to the bedside, caught up the sheet of note-paper on which she had written from her mistress's dictation, and hid it in her bosom. The last look of Mrs. Treverton's eyes fastened sternly and reproachfully on her as she did this, and kept their expression unchanged, through the momentary distortion of the rest of the features, for one breathless moment. That moment passed, and, with the next, the shadow which goes before the presence of death stole up and shut out the light of life in one quiet instant from all the face.

The doctor, followed by the nurse and by one of the servants, entered the room; and, hurrying to the bedside, saw at a glance that the time for his attendance there had passed away forever. He spoke first to the servant who had followed him.

“Go to your master,” he said, “and beg him to wait in his own room until I can come and speak to him.”

Sarah still stood – without moving or speaking, or noticing any one – by the bedside.

The nurse, approaching to draw the curtains together, started at the sight of her face, and turned to the doctor.

“I think this person had better leave the room, Sir?” said the nurse, with some appearance of contempt in her tones and looks. “She seems unreasonably shocked and terrified by what has happened.”

“Quite right,” said the doctor. “It is best that she should withdraw. – Let me recommend you to leave us for a little while,” he added, touching Sarah on the arm.

She shrank back suspiciously, raised one of her hands to the place where the letter lay hidden in her bosom, and pressed it there firmly, while she held out the other hand for a candle.

“You had better rest for a little in your own room,” said the doctor, giving her a candle. “Stop, though,” he continued, after a moment's reflection. “I am going to break the sad news to your master, and I may find that he is anxious to hear any last words that Mrs. Treverton may have spoken in your presence. Perhaps you had better come with me, and wait while I go into Captain Treverton's room.”

“No! no! – oh, not now – not now, for God's sake!” Speaking those words in low, quick, pleading tones, and drawing back affrightedly to the door, Sarah disappeared without waiting a moment to be spoken to again.

“A strange woman!” said the doctor, addressing the nurse. “Follow her, and see where she goes to, in case she is wanted and we are obliged to send for her. I will wait here until you come back.”

When the nurse returned she had nothing to report but that she had followed Sarah Leeson to her own bedroom, had seen her enter it, had listened outside, and had heard her lock the door.

“A strange woman!” repeated the doctor. “One of the silent, secret sort.”

“One of the wrong sort,” said the nurse. “She is always talking to herself, and that is a bad sign, in my opinion. I distrusted her, Sir, the very first day I entered the house.”

Chapter II
The Child

The instant Sarah Leeson had turned the key of her bedroom door, she took the sheet of note-paper from its place of concealment in her bosom – shuddering, when she drew it out, as if the mere contact of it hurt her – placed it open on her little dressing-table, and fixed her eyes eagerly on the lines which the note contained. At first they swam and mingled together before her. She pressed her hands over her eyes, for a few minutes, and then looked at the writing again.

The characters were clear now – vividly clear, and, as she fancied, unnaturally large and near to view. There was the address: “To my Husband;” there the first blotted line beneath, in her dead mistress's handwriting; there the lines that followed, traced by her own pen, with the signature at the end – Mrs. Treverton's first, and then her own. The whole amounted to but very few sentences, written on one perishable fragment of paper, which the flame of a candle would have consumed in a moment. Yet there she sat, reading, reading, reading, over and over again; never touching the note, except when it was absolutely necessary to turn over the first page; never moving, never speaking, never raising her eyes from the paper. As a condemned prisoner might read his death-warrant, so did Sarah Leeson now read the few lines which she and her mistress had written together not half an hour since.

The secret of the paralyzing effect of that writing on her mind lay, not only in itself, but in the circumstances which had attended the act of its production.

The oath which had been proposed by Mrs. Treverton under no more serious influence than the last caprice of her disordered faculties, stimulated by confused remembrances of stage words and stage situations, had been accepted by Sarah Leeson as the most sacred and inviolable engagement to which she could bind herself. The threat of enforcing obedience to her last commands from beyond the grave, which the mistress had uttered in mocking experiment on the superstitious fears of the maid, now hung darkly over the weak mind of Sarah, as a judgment which might descend on her, visibly and inexorably, at any moment of her future life. When she roused herself at last, and pushed away the paper and rose to her feet, she stood quite still for an instant, before she ventured to look behind her. When she did look, it was with an effort and a start, with a searching distrust of the empty dimness in the remoter corners of the room.

Her old habit of talking to herself began to resume its influence, as she now walked rapidly backward and forward, sometimes along the room and sometimes across it. She repeated incessantly such broken phrases as these: “How can I give him the letter? – Such a good master; so kind to us all. – Why did she die, and leave it all to*me*? – I can't bear it alone; it's too much for me.” While reiterating these sentences, she vacantly occupied herself in putting things about the room in order, which were set in perfect order already. All her looks, all her actions, betrayed the vain struggle of a weak mind to sustain itself under the weight of a heavy responsibility. She arranged and re-arranged the cheap china ornaments on her chimney-piece a dozen times over – put her pin-cushion first on the looking-glass, then on the table in front of it – changed the position of the little porcelain dish and tray on her wash-hand-stand, now to one side of the basin, and now to the other. Throughout all these trifling actions the natural grace, delicacy, and prim neat-handedness of the woman still waited mechanically on the most useless and aimless of her occupations of the moment. She knocked nothing down, she put nothing awry; her footsteps at the fastest made no sound – the very skirts of her dress were kept as properly and prudishly composed as if it was broad daylight and the eyes of all her neighbors were looking at her.

From time to time the sense of the words she was murmuring confusedly to herself changed. Sometimes they disjointedly expressed bolder and more self-reliant thoughts. Once they seemed to urge her again to the dressing-table and the open letter on it, against her own will. She read aloud the address, “To my Husband,” and caught the letter up sharply, and spoke in firmer tones. “Why

give it to him at all? Why not let the secret die with her and die with me, as it ought? Why should he know it? He shall*not* know it!"

Saying those last words, she desperately held the letter within an inch of the flame of the candle. At the same moment the white curtain over the window before her stirred a little, as the freshening air found its way through the old-fashioned, ill-fitting sashes. Her eye caught sight of it, as it waved gently backward and forward. She clasped the letter suddenly to her breast with both hands, and shrank back against the wall of the room, her eyes still fastened on the curtain with the same blank look of horror which they had exhibited when Mrs. Treverton had threatened to claim her servant's obedience from the other world.

"Something moves," she gasped to herself, in a breathless whisper. "Something moves in the room."

The curtain waved slowly to and fro for the second time. Still fixedly looking at it over her shoulder, she crept along the wall to the door.

"Do you come to me already?" she said, her eyes riveted on the curtain while her hand groped over the lock for the key. "Before your grave is dug? Before your coffin is made? Before your body is cold?"

She opened the door and glided into the passage; stopped there for a moment, and looked back into the room.

"Rest!" she said. "Rest, mistress – he shall have the letter."

The staircase-lamp guided her out of the passage. Descending hurriedly, as if she feared to give herself time to think, she reached Captain Treverton's study, on the ground-floor, in a minute or two. The door was wide open, and the room was empty.

After reflecting a little, she lighted one of the chamber-candles standing on the hall-table, at the lamp in the study, and ascended the stairs again to her master's bedroom. After repeatedly knocking at the door and obtaining no answer, she ventured to go in. The bed had not been disturbed, the candles had not been lit – to all appearance the room had not even been entered during the night.

There was but one other place to seek him – the chamber in which his wife lay dead. Could she summon the courage to give him the letter there? She hesitated a little – then whispered, "I must! I must!"

The direction she now compelled herself to take led her a little way down the stairs again. She descended very slowly this time, holding cautiously by the banisters, and pausing to take breath almost at every step. The door of what had been Mrs. Treverton's bedroom was opened, when she ventured to knock at it, by the nurse, who inquired, roughly and suspiciously, what she wanted there.

"I want to speak to my master."

"Look for him somewhere else. He was here half an hour ago. He is gone now."

"Do you know where he has gone?"

"No. I don't pry into other people's goings and comings. I mind my own business."

With that discourteous answer, the nurse closed the door again. Just as Sarah turned away from it she looked toward the inner end of the passage. The door of the nursery was situated there. It was ajar, and a dim gleam of candle-light was flickering through it.

She went in immediately, and saw that the candle-light came from an inner room, usually occupied, as she well knew, by the nursery-maid and by the only child of the house of Treverton – a little girl named Rosamond, aged, at that time, nearly five years.

"Can he be there? – in that room, of all the rooms in the house!"

Quickly as the thought arose in her mind, Sarah raised the letter (which she had hitherto carried in her hand) to the bosom of her dress, and hid it for the second time, exactly as she had hidden it on leaving her mistress's bedside.

She then stole across the nursery on tiptoe toward the inner room. The entrance to it, to please some caprice of the child's, had been arched, and framed with trellis-work, gayly colored, so as to

resemble the entrance to a summer-house. Two pretty chintz curtains, hanging inside the trellis-work, formed the only barrier between the day-room and the bedroom. One of these was looped up, and toward the opening thus made Sarah now advanced, after cautiously leaving her candle in the passage outside.

The first object that attracted her attention in the child's bedroom was the figure of the nurse-maid, leaning back, fast asleep, in an easy-chair by the window. Venturing, after this discovery, to look more boldly into the room, she next saw her master sitting with his back toward her, by the side of the child's crib. Little Rosamond was awake, and was standing up in bed with her arms round her father's neck. One of her hands held over his shoulder the doll that she had taken to bed with her, the other was twined gently in his hair. The child had been crying bitterly, and had now exhausted herself, so that she was only moaning a little from time to time, with her head laid wearily on her father's bosom.

The tears stood thick in Sarah's eyes as they looked on her master and on the little hands that lay round his neck. She lingered by the raised curtain, heedless of the risk she ran, from moment to moment, of being discovered and questioned – lingered until she heard Captain Treverton say soothingly to the child:

“Hush, Rosie, dear! hush, my own love! Don't cry any more for poor mamma. Think of poor papa, and try to comfort him.”

Simple as the words were, quietly and tenderly as they were spoken, they seemed instantly to deprive Sarah Leeson of all power of self-control. Reckless whether she was heard or not, she turned and ran into the passage as if she had been flying for her life. Passing the candle she had left there, without so much as a look at it, she made for the stairs, and descended them with headlong rapidity to the kitchen-floor. There one of the servants who had been sitting up met her, and, with a face of astonishment and alarm, asked what was the matter.

“I'm ill – I'm faint – I want air,” she answered, speaking thickly and confusedly. “Open the garden door, and let me out.”

The man obeyed, but doubtfully, as if he thought her unfit to be trusted by herself.

“She gets stranger than ever in her ways,” he said, when he rejoined his fellow-servant, after Sarah had hurried past him into the open air. “Now our mistress is dead, she will have to find another place, I suppose. I, for one, sha'n't break my heart when she's gone. Shall you?”

Chapter III
The Hiding of the Secret

The cool, sweet air in the garden, blowing freshly over Sarah's face, seemed to calm the violence of her agitation. She turned down a side walk, which led to a terrace and overlooked the church of the neighboring village.

The daylight out of doors was clear already. The misty auburn light that goes before sunrise was flowing up, peaceful and lovely, behind a line of black-brown moorland, over all the eastern sky. The old church, with the hedge of myrtle and fuchsia growing round the little cemetery in all the luxuriance which is only seen in Cornwall, was clearing and brightening to view, almost as fast as the morning firmament itself. Sarah leaned her arms heavily on the back of a garden-seat, and turned her face toward the church. Her eyes wandered from the building itself to the cemetery by its side, rested there, and watched the light growing warmer and warmer over the lonesome refuge where the dead lay at rest.

“Oh, my heart! my heart!” she said. “What must it be made of not to break?”

She remained for some time leaning on the seat, looking sadly toward the church-yard, and pondering over the words which she had heard Captain Treverton say to the child. They seemed to connect themselves, as every thing else now appeared to connect itself in her mind, with the letter that had been written on Mrs. Treverton's death-bed. She drew it from her bosom once more, and crushed it up angrily in her fingers.

“Still in my hands! still not seen by any eyes but mine!” she said, looking down at the crumpled pages. “Is it all my fault? If she was alive now – if she had seen what I saw, if she had heard what I heard in the nursery – could she expect me to give him the letter?”

Her mind was apparently steadied by the reflection which her last words expressed. She moved away thoughtfully from the garden-seat, crossed the terrace, descended some wooden steps, and followed a shrubbery path which led round by a winding track from the east to the north side of the house.

This part of the building had been uninhabited and neglected for more than half a century past. In the time of Captain Treverton's father the whole range of the north rooms had been stripped of their finest pictures and their most valuable furniture, to assist in redecorating the west rooms, which now formed the only inhabited part of the house, and which were amply sufficient for the accommodation of the family and of any visitors who came to stay with them. The mansion had been originally built in the form of a square, and had been strongly fortified. Of the many defenses of the place, but one now remained – a heavy, low tower (from which and from the village near, the house derived its name of Porthgenna Tower), standing at the southern extremity of the west front. The south side itself consisted of stables and out-houses, with a ruinous wall in front of them, which, running back eastward at right angles, joined the north side, and so completed the square which the whole outline of the building represented.

The outside view of the range of north rooms, from the weedy, deserted garden below, showed plainly enough that many years had passed since any human creature had inhabited them. The window-panes were broken in some places, and covered thickly with dirt and dust in others. Here, the shutters were closed – there, they were only half opened. The untrained ivy, the rank vegetation growing in fissures of the stone-work, the festoons of spiders' webs, the rubbish of wood, bricks, plaster, broken glass, rags, and strips of soiled cloth, which lay beneath the windows, all told the same tale of neglect. Shadowed by its position, this ruinous side of the house had a dark, cold, wintry aspect, even on the sunny August morning when Sarah Leeson strayed into the deserted northern garden. Lost in the labyrinth of her own thoughts, she moved slowly past flower-beds, long since rooted up,

and along gravel walks overgrown by weeds; her eyes wandering mechanically over the prospect, her feet mechanically carrying her on wherever there was a trace of a footpath, lead where it might.

The shock which the words spoken by her master in the nursery had communicated to her mind, had set her whole nature, so to speak, at bay, and had roused in her, at last, the moral courage to arm herself with a final and desperate resolution. Wandering more and more slowly along the pathways of the forsaken garden, as the course of her ideas withdrew her more and more completely from all outward things, she stopped insensibly on an open patch of ground, which had once been a well-kept lawn, and which still commanded a full view of the long range of uninhabited north rooms.

"What binds me to give the letter to my master at all?" she thought to herself, smoothing out the crumpled paper dreamily in the palm of her hand. "My mistress died without making me swear to do that. Can she visit it on me from the other world, if I keep the promises I swore to observe, and do no more? May I not risk the worst that can happen, so long as I hold religiously to all that I undertook to do on my oath?"

She paused here in reasoning with herself – her superstitious fears still influencing her out of doors, in the daylight, as they had influenced her in her own room, in the time of darkness. She paused – then fell to smoothing the letter again, and began to recall the terms of the solemn engagement which Mrs. Treverton had forced her to contract.

What had she actually bound herself to do? Not to destroy the letter, and not to take it away with her if she left the house. Beyond that, Mrs. Treverton's desire had been that the letter should be given to her husband. Was that last wish binding on the person to whom it had been confided? Yes. As binding as an oath? No.

As she arrived at that conclusion, she looked up.

At first her eyes rested vacantly on the lonely, deserted north front of the house; gradually they became attracted by one particular window exactly in the middle, on the floor above the ground – the largest and the gloomiest of all the row; suddenly they brightened with an expression of intelligence. She started; a faint flush of color flew into her cheeks, and she hastily advanced closer to the wall of the house.

The panes of the large window were yellow with dust and dirt, and festooned about fantastically with cobwebs. Below it was a heap of rubbish, scattered over the dry mould of what might once have been a bed of flowers or shrubs. The form of the bed was still marked out by an oblong boundary of weeds and rank grass. She followed it irresolutely all round, looking up at the window at every step – then stopped close under it, glanced at the letter in her hand, and said to herself abruptly —

"I'll risk it!"

As the words fell from her lips, she hastened back to the inhabited part of the house, followed the passage on the kitchen-floor which led to the housekeeper's room, entered it, and took down from a nail in the wall a bunch of keys, having a large ivory label attached to the ring that connected them, on which was inscribed, "Keys of the North Rooms."

She placed the keys on a writing-table near her, took up a pen, and rapidly added these lines on the blank side of the letter which she had written under her mistress's dictation —

"If this paper should ever be found (which I pray with my whole heart it never may be), I wish to say that I have come to the resolution of hiding it, because I dare not show the writing that it contains to my master, to whom it is addressed. In doing what I now propose to do, though I am acting against my mistress's last wishes, I am not breaking the solemn engagement which she obliged me to make before her on her death-bed. That engagement forbids me to destroy this letter, or to take it away with me if I leave the house. I shall do neither – my purpose is to conceal it in the place, of all others, where I think there is least chance of its ever being found again. Any hardship or misfortune which may follow as a consequence of this deceitful proceeding on my part, will fall on myself. Others, I believe in my conscience, will be the happier for the hiding of the dreadful Secret which this letter contains."

She signed those lines with her name – pressed them hurriedly over the blotting-pad that lay with the rest of the writing materials on the table – took the note in her hand, after first folding it up – and then, snatching at the bunch of keys, with a look all round her as if she dreaded being secretly observed, left the room. All her actions since she had entered it had been hasty and sudden; she was evidently afraid of allowing herself one leisure moment to reflect.

On quitting the housekeeper's room, she turned to the left, ascended a back staircase, and unlocked a door at the top of it. A cloud of dust flew all about her as she softly opened the door; a mouldy coolness made her shiver as she crossed a large stone hall, with some black old family portraits hanging on the walls, the canvases of which were bulging out of the frames. Ascending more stairs, she came upon a row of doors, all leading into rooms on the first floor of the north side of the house.

She knelt down, putting the letter on the boards beside her, opposite the key-hole of the fourth door she came to after reaching the top of the stairs, peered in distrustfully for an instant, then began to try the different keys till she found one that fitted the lock. She had great difficulty in accomplishing this, from the violence of her agitation, which made her hands tremble to such a degree that she was hardly able to keep the keys separate one from the other. At length she succeeded in opening the door. Thicker clouds of dust than she had yet met with flew out the moment the interior of the room was visible; a dry, airless, suffocating atmosphere almost choked her as she stooped to pick up the letter from the floor. She recoiled from it at first, and took a few steps back toward the staircase. But she recovered her resolution immediately.

“I can't go back now!” she said, desperately, and entered the room.

She did not remain in it more than two or three minutes. When she came out again her face was white with fear, and the hand which had held the letter when she went into the room held nothing now but a small rusty key.

After locking the door again, she examined the large bunch of keys which she had taken from the housekeeper's room, with closer attention than she had yet bestowed on them. Besides the ivory label attached to the ring that connected them, there were smaller labels, of parchment, tied to the handles of some of the keys, to indicate the rooms to which they gave admission. The particular key which she had used had one of these labels hanging to it. She held the little strip of parchment close to the light, and read on it, in written characters faded by time —

“The Myrtle Room.”

The room in which the letter was hidden had a name, then! A prettily sounding name that would attract most people, and keep pleasantly in their memories. A name to be distrusted by her, after what she had done, on that very account.

She took her housewife from its usual place in the pocket of her apron, and, with the scissors which it contained, cut the label from the key. Was it enough to destroy that one only? She lost herself in a maze of useless conjecture; and ended by cutting off the other labels, from no other motive than instinctive suspicion of them.

Carefully gathering up the strips of parchment from the floor, she put them, along with the little rusty key which she had brought out of the Myrtle Room, in the empty pocket of her apron. Then, carrying the large bunch of keys in her hand, and carefully locking the doors that she had opened on her way to the north side of Porthgenna Tower, she retraced her steps to the housekeeper's room, entered it without seeing any body, and hung up the bunch of keys again on the nail in the wall.

Fearful, as the morning hours wore on, of meeting with some of the female servants, she next hastened back to her bedroom. The candle she had left there was still burning feebly in the fresh daylight. When she drew aside the window-curtain, after extinguishing the candle, a shadow of her former fear passed over her face, even in the broad daylight that now flowed in upon it. She opened the window, and leaned out eagerly into the cool air.

Whether for good or for evil, the fatal Secret was hidden now – the act was done. There was something calming in the first consciousness of that one fact. She could think more composedly, after that, of herself, and of the uncertain future that lay before her.

Under no circumstances could she have expected to remain in her situation, now that the connection between herself and her mistress had been severed by death. She knew that Mrs. Treverton, in the last days of her illness, had earnestly recommended her maid to Captain Treverton's kindness and protection, and she felt assured that the wife's last entreaties, in this as in all other instances, would be viewed as the most sacred of obligations by the husband. But could she accept protection and kindness at the hand of the master whom she had been accessory to deceiving, and whom she had now committed herself to deceiving still? The bare idea of such baseness was so revolting, that she accepted, almost with a sense of relief, the one sad alternative that remained – the alternative of leaving the house immediately.

And how was she to leave it? By giving formal warning, and so exposing herself to questions which would be sure to confuse and terrify her? Could she venture to face her master again, after what she had done – to face him, when his first inquiries would refer to her mistress, when he would be certain to ask her for the last mournful details, for the slightest word that had been spoken during the death-scene that she alone had witnessed? She started to her feet, as the certain consequences of submitting herself to that unendurable trial all crowded together warningly on her mind, took her cloak from its place on the wall, and listened at her door in sudden suspicion and fear. Had she heard footsteps? Was her master sending for her already?

No; all was silent outside. A few tears rolled over her cheeks as she put on her bonnet, and felt that she was facing, by the performance of that simple action, the last, and perhaps the hardest to meet, of the cruel necessities in which the hiding of the Secret had involved her. There was no help for it. She must run the risk of betraying every thing, or brave the double trial of leaving Porthgenna Tower, and leaving it secretly.

Secretly – as a thief might go? Without a word to her master? without so much as one line of writing to thank him for his kindness and to ask his pardon? She had unlocked her desk, and had taken from it her purse, one or two letters, and a little book of Wesley's Hymns, before these considerations occurred to her. They made her pause in the act of shutting up the desk. “Shall I write?” she asked herself, “and leave the letter here, to be found when I am gone?”

A little more reflection decided her in the affirmative. As rapidly as her pen could form the letters, she wrote a few lines addressed to Captain Treverton, in which she confessed to having kept a secret from his knowledge which had been left in her charge to divulge; adding, that she honestly believed no harm could come to him, or to any one in whom he was interested, by her failing to perform the duty intrusted to her; and ended by asking his pardon for leaving the house secretly, and by begging, as a last favor, that no search might ever be made for her. Having sealed this short note, and left it on her table, with her master's name written outside, she listened again at the door; and, after satisfying herself that no one was yet stirring, began to descend the stairs at Porthgenna Tower for the last time.

At the entrance of the passage leading to the nursery she stopped. The tears which she had restrained since leaving her room began to flow again. Urgent as her reasons now were for effecting her departure without a moment's loss of time, she advanced, with the strangest inconsistency, a few steps toward the nursery door. Before she had gone far, a slight noise in the lower part of the house caught her ear and instantly checked her further progress.

While she stood doubtful, the grief at her heart – a greater grief than any she had yet betrayed – rose irresistibly to her lips, and burst from them in one deep gasping sob. The sound of it seemed to terrify her into a sense of the danger of her position, if she delayed a moment longer. She ran out again to the stairs, reached the kitchen-floor in safety, and made her escape by the garden door which the servant had opened for her at the dawn of the morning.

On getting clear of the premises at Porthgenna Tower, instead of taking the nearest path over the moor that led to the high-road, she diverged to the church; but stopped before she came to it, at the public well of the neighborhood, which had been sunk near the cottages of the Porthgenna fishermen. Cautiously looking round her, she dropped into the well the little rusty key which she had brought out of the Myrtle Room; then hurried on, and entered the church-yard. She directed her course straight to one of the graves, situated a little apart from the rest. On the head-stone were inscribed these words:

SACRED TO THE MEMORY
OF
Hugh Polwheal,
AGED 26 YEARS.
HE MET WITH HIS DEATH
THROUGH THE FALL OF A ROCK
IN
PORTHGENNA MINE,
DECEMBER 17TH, 1823.

Gathering a few leaves of grass from the grave, Sarah opened the little book of Wesley's Hymns which she had brought with her from the bedroom of Porthgenna Tower, and placed the leaves delicately and carefully between the pages. As she did this, the wind blew open the title-page of the Hymns, and displayed this inscription on it, written in large, clumsy characters —"Sarah Leeson, her book. The gift of Hugh Polwheal."

Having secured the blades of grass between the pages of the book, she retraced her way toward the path leading to the high-road. Arrived on the moor, she took out of her apron pocket the parchment labels that had been cut from the keys, and scattered them under the furze-bushes.

"Gone," she said, "as I am gone! God help and forgive me – it is all done and over now!"

With those words she turned her back on the old house and the sea-view below it, and followed the moorland path on her way to the high-road.

Four hours afterward Captain Treverton desired one of the servants at Porthgenna Tower to inform Sarah Leeson that he wished to hear all she had to tell him of the dying moments of her mistress. The messenger returned with looks and words of amazement, and with the letter that Sarah had addressed to her master in his hand.

The moment Captain Treverton had read the letter, he ordered an immediate search to be made after the missing woman. She was so easy to describe and to recognize, by the premature grayness of her hair, by the odd, scared look in her eyes, and by her habit of constantly talking to herself, that she was traced with certainty as far as Truro. In that large town the track of her was lost, and never recovered again.

Rewards were offered; the magistrates of the district were interested in the case; all that wealth and power could do to discover her was done – and done in vain. No clew was found to suggest a suspicion of her whereabouts, or to help in the slightest degree toward explaining the nature of the secret at which she had hinted in her letter. Her master never saw her again, never heard of her again, after the morning of the twenty-third of August, eighteen hundred and twenty-nine.

Book II

Chapter I
Fifteen Years After

The church of Long Beckley (a large agricultural village in one of the midland counties of England), although a building in no way remarkable either for its size, its architecture, or its antiquity, possesses, nevertheless, one advantage which mercantile London has barbarously denied to the noble cathedral church of St. Paul. It has plenty of room to stand in, and it can consequently be seen with perfect convenience from every point of view, all around the compass.

The large open space around the church can be approached in three different directions. There is a road from the village, leading straight to the principal door. There is a broad gravel walk, which begins at the vicarage gates, crosses the church-yard, and stops, as in duty bound, at the vestry entrance. There is a footpath over the fields, by which the lord of the manor, and the gentry in general who live in his august neighborhood, can reach the side door of the building, whenever their natural humility may incline them to encourage Sabbath observance in the stables by going to church, like the lower sort of worshipers, on their own legs.

At half-past seven o'clock, on a certain fine summer morning, in the year eighteen hundred and forty-four, if any observant stranger had happened to be standing in some unnoticed corner of the church-yard, and to be looking about him with sharp eyes, he would probably have been the witness of proceedings which might have led him to believe that there was a conspiracy going on in Long Beckley, of which the church was the rallying-point, and some of the most respectable inhabitants the principal leaders. Supposing him to have been looking toward the vicarage as the clock chimed the half-hour, he would have seen the vicar of Long Beckley, the Reverend Doctor Chennery, leaving his house suspiciously, by the back way, glancing behind him guiltily as he approached the gravel walk that led to the vestry, stopping mysteriously just outside the door, and gazing anxiously down the road that led from the village.

Assuming that our observant stranger would, upon this, keep out of sight, and look down the road, like the vicar, he would next have seen the clerk of the church – an austere, yellow-faced man – a Protestant Loyola in appearance, and a working shoemaker by trade – approaching with a look of unutterable mystery in his face, and a bunch of big keys in his hands. He would have seen the vicar nod in an abstracted manner to the clerk, and say, “Fine morning, Thomas. Have you had your breakfast yet?” He would have heard Thomas reply, with a suspicious regard for minute particulars: “I have had a cup of tea and a crust, Sir.” And he would then have seen these two local conspirators, after looking up with one accord at the church clock, draw off together to the side door which commanded a view of the footpath across the fields.

Following them – as our inquisitive stranger could not fail to do – he would have detected three more conspirators advancing along the footpath. The leader of this treasonable party was an elderly gentleman, with a weather-beaten face and a bluff, hearty manner. His two followers were a young gentleman and a young lady, walking arm-in-arm, and talking together in whispers. They were dressed in the plainest morning costume. The faces of both were rather pale, and the manner of the lady was a little flurried. Otherwise there was nothing remarkable to observe in them, until they came to the wicket-gate leading into the church-yard; and there the conduct of the young gentleman seemed, at first sight, rather inexplicable. Instead of holding the gate open for the lady to pass through, he hung back, allowed her to open it for herself, waited till she had got to the church-yard side, and

then, stretching out his hand over the gate, allowed her to lead him through the entrance, as if he had suddenly changed from a grown man to a helpless little child.

Noting this, and remarking also that, when the party from the fields had arrived within greeting distance of the vicar, and when the clerk had used his bunch of keys to open the church-door, the young lady's companion was led into the building (this time by Doctor Chennery's hand), as he had been previously led through the wicket-gate, our observant stranger must have arrived at one inevitable conclusion – that the person requiring such assistance as this was suffering under the affliction of blindness. Startled a little by that discovery, he would have been still further amazed, if he had looked into the church, by seeing the blind man and the young lady standing together before the altar rails, with the elderly gentleman in parental attendance. Any suspicions he might now entertain that the bond which united the conspirators at that early hour of the morning was of the hymeneal sort, and that the object of their plot was to celebrate a wedding with the strictest secrecy, would have been confirmed in five minutes by the appearance of Doctor Chennery from the vestry in full canonicals, and by the reading of the marriage service in the reverend gentleman's most harmonious officiating tones. The ceremony concluded, the attendant stranger must have been more perplexed than ever by observing that the persons concerned in it all separated, the moment the signing, the kissing, and congratulating duties proper to the occasion had been performed, and quickly retired in the various directions by which they had approached the church.

Leaving the clerk to return by the village road, the bride, bridegroom, and elderly gentleman to turn back by the footpath over the fields, and the visionary stranger of these pages to vanish out of them in any direction that he pleases – let us follow Doctor Chennery to the vicarage breakfast-table, and hear what he has to say about his professional exertions of the morning in the familiar atmosphere of his own family circle.

The persons assembled at the breakfast were, first, Mr. Phippen, a guest; secondly, Miss Sturch, a governess; thirdly, fourthly, and fifthly, Miss Louisa Chennery (aged eleven years), Miss Amelia Chennery (aged nine years), and Master Robert Chennery (aged eight years). There was no mother's face present, to make the household picture complete. Doctor Chennery had been a widower since the birth of his youngest child.

The guest was an old college acquaintance of the vicar's, and he was supposed to be now staying at Long Beckley for the benefit of his health. Most men of any character at all contrive to get a reputation of some sort which individualizes them in the social circle amid which they move. Mr. Phippen was a man of some little character, and he lived with great distinction in the estimation of his friends on the reputation of being A Martyr to Dyspepsia.

Wherever Mr. Phippen went, the woes of Mr. Phippen's stomach went with him. He dieted himself publicly, and physicked himself publicly. He was so intensely occupied with himself and his maladies, that he would let a chance acquaintance into the secret of the condition of his tongue at five minutes' notice; being just as perpetually ready to discuss the state of his digestion as people in general are to discuss the state of the weather. On this favorite subject, as on all others, he spoke with a wheedling gentleness of manner, sometimes in softly mournful, sometimes in languidly sentimental tones. His politeness was of the oppressively affectionate sort, and he used the word “dear” continually in addressing himself to others. Personally, he could not be called a handsome man. His eyes were watery, large, and light gray; they were always rolling from side to side in a state of moist admiration of something or somebody. His nose was long, drooping, profoundly melancholy – if such an expression may be permitted, in reference to that particular feature. For the rest, his lips had a lachrymose twist; his stature was small; his head large, bald, and loosely set on his shoulders; his manner of dressing himself eccentric, on the side of smartness; his age about five-and-forty; his condition that of a single man. Such was Mr. Phippen, the Martyr to Dyspepsia, and the guest of the vicar of Long Beckley.

Miss Sturch, the governess, may be briefly and accurately described as a young lady who had never been troubled with an idea or a sensation since the day when she was born. She was a little,

plump, quiet, white-skinned, smiling, neatly dressed girl, wound up accurately to the performance of certain duties at certain times; and possessed of an inexhaustible vocabulary of commonplace talk, which dribbled placidly out of her lips whenever it was called for, always in the same quantity, and always of the same quality, at every hour in the day, and through every change in the seasons. Miss Sturch never laughed, and never cried, but took the safe middle course of smiling perpetually. She smiled when she came down on a morning in January, and said it was very cold. She smiled when she came down on a morning in July, and said it was very hot. She smiled when the bishop came once a year to see the vicar; she smiled when the butcher's boy came every morning for orders. Let what might happen at the vicarage, nothing ever jerked Miss Sturch out of the one smooth groove in which she ran perpetually, always at the same pace. If she had lived in a royalist family, during the civil wars in England, she would have rung for the cook, to order dinner, on the morning of the execution of Charles the First. If Shakspeare had come back to life again, and had called at the vicarage at six o'clock on Saturday evening, to explain to Miss Sturch exactly what his views were in composing the tragedy of Hamlet, she would have smiled and said it was extremely interesting, until the striking of seven o'clock; at which time she would have left him in the middle of a sentence, to superintend the housemaid in the verification of the washing-book. A very estimable young person, Miss Sturch (as the ladies of Long Beckley were accustomed to say); so judicious with the children, and so attached to her household duties; such a well-regulated mind, and such a crisp touch on the piano; just nice-looking enough, just well-dressed enough, just talkative enough; not quite old enough, perhaps, and a little too much inclined to be embraceably plump about the region of the waist – but, on the whole, a most estimable young person – very much so, indeed.

On the characteristic peculiarities of Miss Sturch's pupils, it is not necessary to dwell at very great length. Miss Louisa's habitual weakness was an inveterate tendency to catch cold. Miss Amelia's principal defect was a disposition to gratify her palate by eating supplementary dinners and breakfasts at unauthorized times and seasons. Master Robert's most noticeable failings were caused by alacrity in tearing his clothes, and obtuseness in learning the Multiplication Table. The virtues of all three were of much the same nature – they were well grown, they were genuine children, and they were boisterously fond of Miss Sturch.

To complete the gallery of family portraits, an outline, at the least, must be attempted of the vicar himself. Doctor Chennery was, in a physical point of view, a credit to the Establishment to which he was attached. He stood six feet two in his shooting-shoes; he weighed fifteen stone; he was the best bowler in the Long Beckley cricket-club; he was a strictly orthodox man in the matter of wine and mutton; he never started disagreeable theories about people's future destinies in the pulpit, never quarreled with any body out of the pulpit, never buttoned up his pockets when the necessities of his poor brethren (Dissenters included) pleaded with him to open them. His course through the world was a steady march along the high and dry middle of a safe turnpike-road. The serpentine side-paths of controversy might open as alluringly as they pleased on his right hand and on his left, but he kept on his way sturdily, and never regarded them. Innovating young recruits in the Church army might entrappingly open the Thirty-nine Articles under his very nose, but the veteran's wary eye never looked a hair's-breadth further than his own signature at the bottom of them. He knew as little as possible of theology, he had never given the Privy Council a minute's trouble in the whole course of his life, he was innocent of all meddling with the reading or writing of pamphlets, and he was quite incapable of finding his way to the platform of Exeter Hall. In short, he was the most unclerical of clergymen – but, for all that, he had such a figure for a surplice as is seldom seen. Fifteen stone weight of upright muscular flesh, without an angry spot or sore place in any part of it, has the merit of suggesting stability, at any rate – an excellent virtue in pillars of all kinds, but an especially precious quality, at the present time, in a pillar of the Church.

As soon as the vicar entered the breakfast-parlor, the children assailed him with a chorus of shouts. He was a severe disciplinarian in the observance of punctuality at meal-times; and he now stood convicted by the clock of being too late for breakfast by a quarter of an hour.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting, Miss Sturch,” said the vicar; “but I have a good excuse for being late this morning.”

“Pray don't mention it, Sir,” said Miss Sturch, blandly rubbing her plump little hands one over the other. “A beautiful morning. I fear we shall have another warm day. – Robert, my love, your elbow is on the table. – A beautiful morning, indeed!”

“Stomach still out of order – eh, Phippen?” asked the vicar, beginning to carve the ham.

Mr. Phippen shook his large head dolefully, placed his yellow forefinger, ornamented with a large turquoise ring, on the centre check of his light-green summer waistcoat – looked piteously at Doctor Chennery, and sighed – removed the finger, and produced from the breast pocket of his wrapper a little mahogany case – took out of it a neat pair of apothecary's scales, with the accompanying weights, a morsel of ginger, and a highly polished silver nutmeg-grater. “Dear Miss Sturch will pardon an invalid?” said Mr. Phippen, beginning to grate the ginger feebly into the nearest tea-cup.

“Guess what has made me a quarter of an hour late this morning,” said the vicar, looking mysteriously all round the table.

“Lying in bed, papa,” cried the three children, clapping their hands in triumph.

“What do*you* say, Miss Sturch?” asked Doctor Chennery.

Miss Sturch smiled as usual, rubbed her hands as usual, cleared her throat softly as usual, looked at the tea-urn, and begged, with the most graceful politeness, to be excused if she said nothing.

“Your turn now, Phippen,” said the vicar. “Come, guess what has kept me late this morning.”

“My dear friend,” said Mr. Phippen, giving the Doctor a brotherly squeeze of the hand, “don't ask me to guess – I know! I saw what you eat at dinner yesterday – I saw what you drank after dinner. No digestion could stand it – not even yours. Guess what has made you late this morning? Pooh! pooh! I know. You dear, good soul, you have been taking physic!”

“Hav'n't touched a drop, thank God, for the last ten years!” said Doctor Chennery, with a look of devout gratitude. “No, no; you're all wrong. The fact is, I have been to church; and what do you think I have been doing there? Listen, Miss Sturch – listen, girls, with all your ears. Poor blind young Frankland is a happy man at last – I have married him to our dear Rosamond Treverton this very morning!”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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