ТОМАС ДЕ КВИНСИ

NARRATIVE AND MISCELLANEOUS PAPERS — VOLUME 1

Томас Де Квинси

Narrative and Miscellaneous Papers — Volume 1

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=34840062
Narrative and Miscellaneous Papers — Volume 1:

Содержание

Thomas De Quincey Narrative and Miscellaneous Papers — Volume 1

THE HOUSEHOLD WRECK

'To be weak,' we need not the great archangel's voice to tell us, '*is to be miserable*.' All weakness is suffering and humiliation, no matter for its mode or its subject. Beyond all other weakness, therefore, and by a sad prerogative, as more miserable than what is most miserable in all, that capital weakness of man which regards the *tenure* of his enjoyments and his power to protect, even for a moment, the crown of flowers—flowers, at the best, how frail and few! —which sometimes settles upon his haughty brow. There is no end, there never will be an end, of the lamentations which ascend from earth and the rebellious heart of her children, upon this huge opprobrium of human pride —the everlasting mutabilities of all which man can grasp by his power or by his aspirations, the fragility of all which he inherits, and the hollowness visible amid the very raptures of enjoyment to every eye which looks for a moment underneath the draperies of the shadowy *present*, the hollowness, the blank treachery of hollowness, upon which all the pomps and vanities

of life ultimately repose. This trite but unwearying theme, this impassioned common-place of humanity, is the subject in every age of variation without end, from the poet, the rhetorician, the fabulist, the moralist, the divine, and the philosopher. All, amidst the sad vanity of their sighs and groans, labor to put on record and to establish this monotonous complaint, which needs not other record or evidence than those very sighs and groans. What is life? Darkness and formless vacancy for a beginning, or something beyond all beginning—then next a dim lotos of human consciousness, finding itself afloat upon the bosom of waters without a shore—then a few sunny smiles and many tears —a little love and infinite strife—whisperings from paradise and fierce mockeries from the anarchy of chaos—dust and ashes— and once more darkness circling round, as if from the beginning, and in this way rounding or making an island of our fantastic existence,—*that* is human life; *that* the inevitable amount of man's laughter and his tears—of what he suffers and he does —of his motions this way and that way—to the right or to the left—backwards or forwards—of all his seeming realities and all his absolute negations—his shadowy pomps and his pompous shadows—of whatsoever he thinks, finds, makes or mars, creates or animates, loves, hates, or in dread hope anticipates;—so it is, so it has been, so it will be, for ever and ever.

Yet in the lowest deep there still yawns a lower deep; and in the vast halls of man's frailty, there are separate and more gloomy chambers of a frailty more exquisite and consummate.

We account it frailty that threescore years and ten make the upshot of man's pleasurable existence, and that, far before that time is reached, his beauty and his power have fallen among weeds and forgetfulness. But there is a frailty, by comparison with which this ordinary flux of the human race seems to have a vast duration. Cases there are, and those not rare, in which a single week, a day, an hour sweeps away all vestiges and landmarks of a memorable felicity; in which the ruin travels faster than the flying showers upon the mountain-side, faster 'than a musician scatters sounds;' in which 'it was' and 'it is not' are words of the self-same tongue, in the self-same minute; in which the sun that at noon beheld all sound and prosperous, long before its setting hour looks out upon a total wreck, and sometimes upon the total abolition of any fugitive memorial that there ever had been a vessel to be wrecked, or a wreck to be obliterated.

These cases, though here spoken of rhetorically, are of daily occurrence; and, though they may seem few by comparison with the infinite millions of the species, they are many indeed, if they be reckoned absolutely for themselves; and throughout the limits of a whole nation, not a day passes over us but many families are robbed of their heads, or even swallowed up in ruin themselves, or their course turned out of the sunny beams into a dark wilderness. Shipwrecks and nightly conflagrations are sometimes, and especially among some nations, wholesale calamities; battles yet more so; earthquakes, the famine, the

pestilence, though rarer, are visitations yet wider in their desolation. Sickness and commercial ill-luck, if narrower, are more frequent scourges. And most of all, or with most darkness in its train, comes the sickness of the brain—lunacy—which, visiting nearly one thousand in every million, must, in every populous nation, make many ruins in each particular day. 'Babylon in ruins,' says a great author, 'is not so sad a sight as a human soul overthrown by lunacy.' But there is a sadder even than *that*,—the sight of a family-ruin wrought by crime is even more appalling. Forgery, breaches of trust, embezzlement, of private or public funds—(a crime sadly on the increase since the example of Fauntleroy, and the suggestion of its great feasibility first made by him)—these enormities, followed too often, and countersigned for their final result to the future happiness of families, by the appalling catastrophe of suicide, must naturally, in every wealthy nation, or wherever property and the modes of property are much developed, constitute the vast majority of all that come under the review of public justice. Any of these is sufficient to make shipwreck of all peace and comfort for a family; and often, indeed, it happens that the desolation is accomplished within the course of one revolving sun; often the whole dire catastrophe, together with its total consequences, is both accomplished and made known to those whom it chiefly concerns within one and the same hour. The mighty Juggernaut of social life, moving onwards with its everlasting thunders, pauses not for a moment to spare—to pity—to look aside,

but rushes forward for ever, impassive as the marble in the quarry—caring not for whom it destroys, for the how many, or for the results, direct and indirect, whether many or few. The increasing grandeur and magnitude of the social system, the more it multiplies and extends its victims, the more it conceals them; and for the very same reason: just as in the Roman amphitheatres, when they grew to the magnitude of mighty cities, (in some instances accommodating four hundred thousand spectators, in many a fifth part of that amount,) births and deaths became ordinary events, which, in a small modern theatre, are rare and memorable; and exactly as these prodigious accidents multiplied, *pari passu*, they were disregarded and easily concealed: for curiosity was no longer excited; the sensation attached to them was little or none.

From these terrific tragedies, which, like monsoons or tornadoes, accomplish the work of years in an hour, not merely an impressive lesson is derived, sometimes, perhaps, a warning, but also (and this is of universal application) some consolation. Whatever may have been the misfortunes or the sorrows of a man's life, he is still privileged to regard himself and his friends as amongst the fortunate by comparison, in so far as he has escaped these wholesale storms, either as an actor in producing them, or a contributor to their violence—or even more innocently, (though oftentimes not less miserably)—as a participator in the instant ruin, or in the long arrears of suffering which they entail.

The following story falls within the class of hasty tragedies, and sudden desolations here described. The reader is assured that every incident is strictly true: nothing, in that respect, has been altered; nor, indeed, anywhere except in the conversations, of which, though the results and general outline are known, the separate details have necessarily been lost under the agitating circumstances which produced them. It has been judged right and delicate to conceal the name of the great city, and therefore of the nation in which these events occurred, chiefly out of consideration for the descendants of one person concerned in the narrative: otherwise, it might not have been requisite: for it is proper to mention, that every person directly a party to the case has been long laid in the grave: all of them, with one solitary exception, upwards of fifty years.

* * * * *

It was early spring in the year 17—; the day was the 6th of April; and the weather, which had been of a wintry fierceness for the preceding six or seven weeks—cold indeed beyond anything known for many years, gloomy for ever, and broken by continual storms—was now by a Swedish transformation all at once bright, genial, heavenly. So sudden and so early a prelusion of summer, it was generally feared, could not last. But that only made every body the more eager to lose no hour of an enjoyment that might prove so fleeting. It seemed as if the whole population of the

place, a population among the most numerous in Christendom, had been composed of hybernating animals suddenly awakened by the balmy sunshine from their long winter's torpor. Through every hour of the golden morning the streets were resonant with female parties of young and old, the timid and the bold, nay, even of the most delicate valetudinarians, now first tempted to lay aside their wintry clothing together with their fireside habits, whilst the whole rural environs of our vast city, the woodlands, and the interminable meadows began daily to re-echo the glad voices of the young and jovial awaking once again, like the birds and the flowers, and universal nature, to the luxurious happiness of this most delightful season.

Happiness do I say? Yes, happiness; happiness to me above all others. For I also in those days was among the young and the gay; I was healthy; I was strong; I was prosperous in a worldly sense! I owed no man a shilling; feared no man's face; shunned no man's presence. I held a respectable station in society; I was myself, let me venture to say it, respected generally for my personal qualities, apart from any advantages I might draw from fortune or inheritance; I had reason to think myself popular amongst the very slender circle of my acquaintance; and finally, which perhaps was the crowning grace to all these elements of happiness, I suffered not from the presence of *ennui*, nor ever feared to suffer: for my temperament was constitutionally ardent; I had a powerful animal sensibility; and I knew the one great secret for maintaining its equipoise, viz., by powerful daily

exercise; and thus I lived in the light and presence, or, (if I should not be suspected of seeking rhetorical expressions, I would say,) in one eternal solstice of unclouded hope.

These, you will say, were blessings; these were golden elements of felicity. They were so; and yet, with the single exception of my healthy frame and firm animal organization, I feel that I have mentioned hitherto nothing but what by comparison might be thought of a vulgar quality. All the other advantages that I have enumerated, had they been yet wanting, might have been acquired; had they been forfeited, might have been reconquered; had they been even irretrievably lost, might, by a philosophic effort, have been dispensed with; compensations might have been found for any of them, many equivalents, or if not, consolations at least, for their absence. But now it remains to speak of other blessings too mighty to be valued, not merely as transcending in rank and dignity all other constituents of happiness, but for a reason far sadder than that—because, once lost, they were incapable of restoration, and because not to be dispensed with; blessings in which 'either we must live or have no life:' lights to the darkness of our paths and to the infirmity of our steps—which, once extinguished, never more on this side the gates of Paradise can any man hope to see re-illumined for himself. Amongst these I may mention an intellect, whether powerful or not in itself, at any rate most elaborately cultivated; and, to say the truth, I had little other business before me in this life than to pursue this lofty and delightful task. I may add, as

a blessing, not in the same *positive* sense as that which I have just mentioned, because not of a nature to contribute so hourly to the employment of the thoughts, but yet in this sense equal, that the absence of either would have been an equal affliction, —namely, a conscience void of all offence. It was little indeed that I, drawn by no necessities of situation into temptations of that nature, had done no injury to any man. That was fortunate; but I could not much value myself upon what was so much an accident of my situation. Something, however, I might pretend to beyond this *negative* merit; for I had originally a benign nature; and, as I advanced in years and thoughtfulness, the gratitude which possessed me for my own exceeding happiness led me to do that by principle and system which I had already done upon blind impulse; and thus upon a double argument I was incapable of turning away from the prayer of the afflicted, whatever had been the sacrifice to myself. Hardly, perhaps, could it have been said in a sufficient sense at that time that I was a religious man: yet, undoubtedly, I had all the foundations within me upon which religion might hereafter have grown. My heart overflowed with thankfulness to Providence: I had a natural tone of unaffected piety; and thus far, at least, I might have been called a religious man, that in the simplicity of truth I could have exclaimed,

'O, Abner, I fear God, and I fear none beside.'

But wherefore seek to delay ascending by a natural climax to that final consummation and perfect crown of my felicity— that almighty blessing which ratified their value to all the rest?

Wherefore, oh! wherefore do I shrink in miserable weakness from—what? Is it from reviving, from calling up again into fierce and insufferable light the images and features of a long-buried happiness? That would be a natural shrinking and a reasonable weakness. But how escape from reviving, whether I give it utterance or not, that which is for ever vividly before me? What need to call into artificial light that which, whether sleeping or waking, by night or by day, for eight-and-thirty years has seemed by its miserable splendor to scorch my brain? Wherefore shrink from giving language, simple vocal utterance, to that burden of anguish which by so long an endurance has lost no atom of its weight, nor can gain any most surely by the loudest publication? Need there can be none, after this, to say that the priceless blessing, which I have left to the final place in this ascending review, was the companion of my life—my darling and youthful wife. Oh! dovelike woman! fated in an hour the most defenceless to meet with the ravening vulture,—lamb fallen amongst wolves, —trembling—fluttering fawn, whose path was inevitably to be crossed by the bloody tiger;—angel, whose most innocent heart fitted thee for too early a flight from this impure planet; if indeed it were a necessity that thou shouldst find no rest for thy footing except amidst thy native heavens, if indeed to leave what was not worthy of thee were a destiny not to be evaded—a summons not to be put by,—yet why, why, again and again I demand—why was it also necessary that this, thy departure, so full of wo to me, should also to thyself be heralded by the pangs of

martyrdom? Sainted love, if, like the ancient children of the Hebrews, like Meshech and Abednego, thou wert called by divine command, whilst yet almost a child, to walk, and to walk alone, through the fiery furnace,—wherefore then couldst not thou, like that Meshech and that Abednego, walk unsinged by the dreadful torment, and come forth unharmed? Why, if the sacrifice were to be total, was it necessary to reach it by so dire a struggle? and if the cup, the bitter cup, of final separation from those that were the light of thy eyes and the pulse of thy heart might not be put aside,— yet wherefore was it that thou mightest not drink it up in the natural peace which belongs to a sinless heart?

But these are murmurings, you will say, rebellious murmurings against the proclamations of God. Not so: I have long since submitted myself, resigned myself, nay, even reconciled myself, perhaps, to the great wreck of my life, in so far as it was the will of God, and according to the weakness of my imperfect nature. But my wrath still rises, like a towering flame, against all the earthly instruments of this ruin; I am still at times as unresigned as ever to this tragedy, in so far as it was the work of human malice. Vengeance, as a mission for *me*, as a task for *my* hands in particular, is no longer possible; the thunderbolts of retribution have been long since launched by other hands; and yet still it happens that at times I do—I must—I shall perhaps to the hour of death, rise in maniac fury, and seek, in the very impotence of vindictive madness, groping as it were in blindness of heart, for that tiger from hell-gates that tore away my darling

from my heart. Let me pause, and interrupt this painful strain, to say a word or two upon what she was—and how far worthy of a love more honorable to her (that was possible) and deeper (but that was not possible) than mine. When first I saw her, she—my Agnes—was merely a child, not much (if anything) above sixteen. But, as in perfect womanhood she retained a most childlike expression of countenance, so even then in absolute childhood she put forward the blossoms and the dignity of a woman. Never yet did my eye light upon creature that was born of woman, nor could it enter my heart to conceive one, possessing a figure more matchless in its proportions, more statuesque, and more deliberately and advisedly to be characterized by no adequate word but the word *magnificent*, (a word too often and lightly abused.) In reality, speaking of women, I have seen many beautiful figures, but hardly one except Agnes that could, without hyperbole, be styled truly and memorably magnificent. Though in the first order of tall women, yet, being full in person, and with a symmetry that was absolutely faultless, she seemed to the random sight as little above the ordinary height. Possibly from the dignity of her person, assisted by the dignity of her movements, a stranger would have been disposed to call her at a distance a woman of *commanding* presence; but never, after he had approached near enough to behold her face. Every thought of artifice, of practised effect, or of haughty pretension, fled before the childlike innocence, the sweet feminine timidity, and the more than cherub loveliness of that countenance, which yet

in its lineaments was noble, whilst its expression was purely gentle and confiding. A shade of pensiveness there was about her; but *that* was in her manners, scarcely ever in her features; and the exquisite fairness of her complexion, enriched by the very sweetest and most delicate bloom that ever I have beheld, should rather have allied it to a tone of cheerfulness. Looking at this noble creature, as I first looked at her, when yet upon the early threshold of womanhood

> 'With household motions light and free,
> And steps of virgin liberty'

you might have supposed her some Hebe or young Aurora of the dawn. When you saw only her superb figure, and its promise of womanly development, with the measured dignity of her step, you might for a moment have fancied her some imperial Medea of the Athenian stage—some Volumnia from Rome,

'Or ruling bandit's wife amidst the Grecian isles.'

But catch one glance from her angelic countenance—and then combining the face and the person, you would have dismissed all such fancies, and have pronounced her a Pandora or an Eve, expressly accomplished and held forth by nature as an exemplary model or ideal pattern for the future female sex:—

> 'A perfect woman, nobly plann'd,
> To warm, to comfort, to command:
> And yet a spirit too, and bright

With something of an angel light.'

To this superb young woman, such as I have here sketched her, I surrendered my heart for ever, almost from my first opportunity of seeing her: for so natural and without disguise was her character, and so winning the simplicity of her manners, due in part to her own native dignity of mind, and in part to the deep solitude in which she had been reared, that little penetration was required to put me in possession of all her thoughts; and to win her love, not very much more than to let her see, as see she could not avoid, in connection with that chivalrous homage which at any rate was due to her sex and her sexual perfections, a love for herself on my part, which was in its nature as exalted a passion and as profoundly rooted as any merely human affection can ever yet have been.

On the seventeenth birthday of Agnes we were married. Oh! calendar of everlasting months—months that, like the mighty rivers, shall flow on for ever, immortal as thou, Nile, or Danube, Euphrates, or St. Lawrence! and ye, summer and winter, day and night, wherefore do you bring round continually your signs, and seasons, and revolving hours, that still point and barb the anguish of local recollections, telling me of this and that celestial morning that never shall return, and of too blessed expectations, travelling like yourselves through a heavenly zodiac of changes, till at once and for ever they sank into the grave! Often do I think of seeking for some quiet cell either in the Tropics or in

Arctic latitudes, where the changes of the year, and the external signs corresponding to them, express themselves by no features like those in which the same seasons are invested under our temperate climes: so that, if knowing, we cannot at least feel the identity of their revolutions. We were married, I have said, on the birthday—the seventeenth birthday—of Agnes; and pretty nearly on her eighteenth it was that she placed me at the summit of my happiness, whilst for herself she thus completed the circle of her relations to this life's duties, by presenting me with a son. Of this child, knowing how wearisome to strangers is the fond exultation of parents, I shall simply say, that he inherited his mother's beauty; the same touching loveliness and innocence of expression, the same chiselled nose, mouth, and chin, the same exquisite auburn hair. In many other features, not of person merely, but also of mind and manners, as they gradually began to open before me, this child deepened my love to him by recalling the image of his mother; and what other image was there that I so much wished to keep before me, whether waking or asleep? At the time to which I am now coming but too rapidly, this child, still our only one, and unusually premature, was within four months of completing his third year; consequently Agnes was at that time in her twenty-first year; and I may here add, with respect to myself, that I was in my twenty-sixth.

But, before I come to that period of wo, let me say one word on the temper of mind which so fluent and serene a current of prosperity may be thought to have generated. Too

common a course I know it is, when the stream of life flows with absolute tranquillity, and ruffled by no menace of a breeze —the azure overhead never dimmed by a passing cloud, that in such circumstances the blood stagnates: life, from excess and plethora of sweets, becomes insipid: the spirit of action droops: and it is oftentimes found at such seasons that slight annoyances and molestations, or even misfortunes in a lower key, are not wholly undesirable, as means of stimulating the lazy energies, and disturbing a slumber which is, or soon will be, morbid in its character. I have known myself cases not a few, where, by the very nicest gradations, and by steps too silent and insensible for daily notice, the utmost harmony and reciprocal love had shaded down into fretfulness and petulance, purely from too easy a life, and because all nobler agitations that might have ruffled the sensations occasionally, and all distresses even on the narrowest scale that might have re-awakened the solicitudes of love, by opening necessities for sympathy, for counsel, or for mutual aid, had been shut out by foresight too elaborate, or by prosperity too cloying. But all this, had it otherwise been possible with my particular mind, and at my early age, was utterly precluded by one remarkable peculiarity in my temper. Whether it were that I derived from nature some jealousy and suspicion of all happiness which seems too perfect and unalloyed—[a spirit of restless distrust, which in ancient times often led men to throw valuable gems into the sea, in the hope of thus propitiating the dire deity of misfortune, by voluntarily breaking the fearful chain

of prosperity, and led some of them to weep and groan when the gems thus sacrificed were afterwards brought back to their hand by simple fishermen, who had recovered them in the intestines of fishes—a portentous omen, which was interpreted into a sorrowful indication that the deity thus answered the propitiatory appeal, and made solemn proclamation that he had rejected it] — whether, I say, it were this spirit of jealousy awaked in me by too steady and too profound a felicity—or whether it were that great overthrows and calamities have some mysterious power to send forward a dim misgiving of their advancing footsteps, and really and indeed,

'That in to-day already walks to-morrow;'

or whether it were partly, as I have already put the case in my first supposition, a natural instinct of distrust, but irritated and enlivened by a particular shock of superstitious alarm; which, or whether any of these causes it were that kept me apprehensive, and on the watch for disastrous change, I will not here undertake to determine. Too certain it is that I was so. I never ridded myself of an over-mastering and brooding sense, shadowy and vague, a dim abiding feeling (that sometimes was and sometimes was not exalted into a conscious presentiment) of some great calamity travelling towards me; not perhaps immediately impending—perhaps even at a great distance; but already—dating from some secret hour—already in motion upon some remote line of approach. This feeling I could not assuage by sharing it with Agnes. No motive could be strong enough for persuading me to

communicate so gloomy a thought with one who, considering her extreme healthiness, was but too remarkably prone to pensive, if not to sorrowful, contemplations. And thus the obligation which I felt to silence and reserve, strengthened the morbid impression I had received; whilst the remarkable incident I have adverted to served powerfully to rivet the superstitious chain which was continually gathering round me. The incident was this—and before I repeat it, let me pledge my word of honor, that I report to you the bare facts of the case, without exaggeration, and in the simplicity of truth:—There was at that time resident in the great city, which is the scene of my narrative, a woman, from some part of Hungary, who pretended to the gift of looking into futurity. She had made herself known advantageously in several of the greatest cities of Europe, under the designation of the Hungarian Prophetess; and very extraordinary instances were cited amongst the highest circles of her success in the art which she professed. So ample were the pecuniary tributes which she levied upon the hopes and the fears, or the simple curiosity of the aristocracy, that she was thus able to display not unfrequently a disinterestedness and a generosity, which seemed native to her disposition, amongst the humbler classes of her applicants; for she rejected no addresses that were made to her, provided only they were not expressed in levity or scorn, but with sincerity, and in a spirit of confiding respect. It happened, on one occasion, when a nursery-servant of ours was waiting in her anteroom for the purpose of taking her turn in consulting the prophetess

professionally, that she had witnessed a scene of consternation and unaffected maternal grief in this Hungarian lady upon the sudden seizure of her son, a child of four or five years old, by a spasmodic inflammation of the throat (since called croup) peculiar to children, and in those days not very well understood by medical men. The poor Hungarian, who had lived chiefly in warm, or at least not damp, climates, and had never so much as heard of this complaint, was almost wild with alarm at the rapid increase of the symptoms which attend the paroxysms, and especially of that loud and distressing sound which marks the impeded respiration. Great, therefore, was her joy and gratitude on finding from our servant that she had herself been in attendance more than once upon cases of the same nature, but very much more violent,—and that, consequently, she was well qualified to suggest and to superintend all the measures of instant necessity, such as the hot-bath, the peculiar medicines, &c., which are almost sure of success when applied in an early stage. Staying to give her assistance until a considerable improvement had taken place in the child, our servant then hurried home to her mistress. Agnes, it may be imagined, dispatched her back with such further and more precise directions as in a very short time availed to re-establish the child in convalescence. These practical services, and the messages of maternal sympathy repeatedly conveyed from Agnes, had completely won the heart of the grateful Hungarian, and she announced her intention of calling with her little boy, to make her personal acknowledgments for

the kindness which had been shown to her. She did so, and we were as much impressed by the sultana-like style of her Oriental beauty, as she, on her part, was touched and captivated by the youthful loveliness of my angelic wife. After sitting for above an hour, during which time she talked with a simplicity and good feeling that struck us as remarkable in a person professing an art usually connected with so much of conscious fraud, she rose to take her leave. I must mention that she had previously had our little boy sitting on her knee, and had at intervals thrown a hasty glance upon the palms of his hands. On parting, Agnes, with her usual frankness, held out her hand. The Hungarian took it with an air of sad solemnity, pressed it fervently, and said: —'Lady, it is my part in this life to look behind the curtain of fate; and oftentimes I see such sights in futurity—some near, some far off—as willingly I would *not* see. For you, young and charming lady, looking like that angel which you are, no destiny can be equal to your deserts. Yet sometimes, true it is, God sees not as man sees; and he ordains, after his unfathomable counsels, to the heavenly-minded a portion in heaven, and to the children whom he loves a rest and a haven not built with hands. Something that I have seen dimly warns me to look no farther. Yet, if you desire it, I will do my office, and I will read for you with truth the lines of fate as they are written upon your hands.' Agnes was a little startled, or even shocked, by this solemn address; but, in a minute or so, a mixed feeling —one half of which was curiosity, and the other half a light-

hearted mockery of her own mysterious awe in the presence of what she had been taught to view as either fraud or insanity—prompted her playfully to insist upon the fullest application of the Hungarian's art to her own case; nay, she would have the hands of our little Francis read and interpreted as well as her own, and she desired to hear the full professional judgment delivered without suppression or softening of its harshest awards. She laughed whilst she said all this; but she also trembled a little. The Hungarian first took the hand of our young child, and perused it with a long and steady scrutiny. She said nothing, but sighed heavily as she resigned it. She then took the hand of Agnes—looked bewildered and aghast—then gazed piteously from Agnes to her child—and at last, bursting into tears, began to move steadily out of the room. I followed her hastily, and remonstrated upon this conduct, by pointing her attention to the obvious truth—that these mysterious suppressions and insinuations, which left all shadowy and indistinct, were far more alarming than the most definite denunciations. Her answer yet rings in my ear:—'Why should I make myself odious to you and to your innocent wife? Messenger of evil I am, and have been to many; but evil I will not prophecy to her. Watch and pray! Much may be done by effectual prayer. Human means, fleshly arms, are vain. There is an enemy in the house of life,' [here she quitted her palmistry for the language of astrology;] 'there is a frightful danger at hand, both for your wife and your child. Already on that dark ocean, over which we are all sailing, I can see dimly the point

at which the enemy's course shall cross your wife's. There is but little interval remaining—not many hours. All is finished; all is accomplished; and already he is almost up with the darlings of your heart. Be vigilant, be vigilant, and yet look not to yourself, but to Heaven, for deliverance.'

This woman was not an impostor: she spoke and uttered her oracles under a wild sense of possession by some superior being, and of mystic compulsion to say what she would have willingly left unsaid; and never yet, before or since, have I seen the light of sadness settle with so solemn an expression into human eyes as when she dropped my wife's hand, and refused to deliver that burden of prophetic wo with which she believed herself to be inspired.

The prophetess departed; and what mood of mind did she leave behind her in Agnes and myself? Naturally there was a little drooping of spirits at first; the solemnity and the heart-felt sincerity of fear and grief which marked her demeanor, made it impossible, at the moment when we were just fresh from their natural influences, that we should recoil into our ordinary spirits. But with the inevitable elasticity of youth and youthful gaiety we soon did so; we could not attempt to persuade ourselves that there had been any conscious fraud or any attempt at scenical effect in the Hungarian's conduct. She had no motive for deceiving us; she had refused all offerings of money, and her whole visit had evidently been made under an overflow of the most grateful feelings for the attentions shown to her child. We acquitted her,

therefore, of sinister intentions; and with our feelings of jealousy, feelings in which we had been educated, towards everything that tended to superstition, we soon agreed to think her some gentle maniac or sad enthusiast, suffering under some form of morbid melancholy. Forty-eight hours, with two nights' sleep, sufficed to restore the wonted equilibrium of our spirits; and that interval brought us onwards to the 6th of April—the day on which, as I have already said, my story properly commences.

On that day, on that lovely 6th of April, such as I have described it, that 6th of April, about nine o'clock in the morning, we were seated at breakfast near the open window—we, that is, Agnes, myself, and little Francis; the freshness of morning spirits rested upon us; the golden light of the morning sun illuminated the room; incense was floating through the air from the gorgeous flowers within and without the house; there in youthful happiness we sat gathered together, a family of love, and there we never sat again. Never again were we three gathered together, nor ever shall be, so long as the sun and its golden light— the morning and the evening—the earth and its flowers endure.

Often have I occupied myself in recalling every circumstance the most trivial of this the final morning of what merits to be called my life. Eleven o'clock, I remember, was striking when Agnes came into my study, and said that she would go into the city, (for we lived in a quite rural suburb,) that she would execute some trifling commissions which she had received from a friend in the country, and would be at home again between one and

two for a stroll which we had agreed to take in the neighboring meadows. About twenty minutes after this she again came into my study dressed for going abroad; for such was my admiration of her, that I had a fancy—fancy it must have been, and yet still I felt it to be real—that under every change she looked best; if she put on a shawl, then a shawl became the most feminine of ornaments; if she laid aside her shawl and her bonnet, then how nymph-like she seemed in her undisguised and unadorned beauty! Full-dress seemed for the time to be best, as bringing forward into relief the splendor of her person, and allowing the exposure of her arms; a simple morning-dress, again, seemed better still, as fitted to call out the childlike innocence of her face, by confining the attention to that. But all these are feelings of fond and blind affection, hanging with rapture over the object of something too like idolatry. God knows, if that be a sin, I was but too profound a sinner; yet sin it never was, sin it could not be, to adore a beauty such as thine, my Agnes. Neither was it her beauty by itself, and that only, which I sought at such times to admire; there was a peculiar sort of double relation in which she stood at moments of pleasurable expectation and excitement, since our little Francis had become of an age to join our party, which made some aspects of her character trebly interesting. She was a wife—and wife to one whom she looked up to as her superior in understanding and in knowledge of the world, whom, therefore, she leaned to for protection. On the other hand, she was also a mother. Whilst, therefore, to her

child she supported the matronly part of guide, and the air of an experienced person; to me she wore, ingenuously and without disguise, the part of a child herself, with all the giddy hopes and unchastised imaginings of that buoyant age. This double character, one aspect of which looks towards her husband and one to her children, sits most gracefully upon many a young wife whose heart is pure and innocent; and the collision between the two separate parts imposed by duty on the one hand, by extreme youth on the other, the one telling her that she is a responsible head of a family and the depository of her husband's honor in its tenderest and most vital interests, the other telling her, through the liveliest language of animal sensibility, and through the very pulses of her blood, that she is herself a child; this collision gives an inexpressible charm to the whole demeanor of many a young married woman, making her other fascinations more touching to her husband, and deepening the admiration she excites; and the more so, as it is a collision which cannot exist except among the very innocent. Years, at any rate, will irresistibly remove this peculiar charm, and gradually replace it by the graces of the matronly character. But in Agnes this change had not yet been effected, partly from nature, and partly from the extreme seclusion of her life. Hitherto she still retained the unaffected expression of her childlike nature; and so lovely in my eyes was this perfect exhibition of natural feminine character, that she rarely or never went out alone upon any little errand to town which might require her to rely upon her own good

sense and courage, that she did not previously come to exhibit herself before me. Partly this was desired by me in that lover-like feeling of admiration already explained, which leads one to court the sight of a beloved object under every change of dress, and under all effects of novelty. Partly it was the interest I took in that exhibition of sweet timidity, and almost childish apprehensiveness, half disguised or imperfectly acknowledged by herself, which (in the way I have just explained) so touchingly contrasted with (and for that very reason so touchingly drew forth) her matronly character. But I hear some objector say at this point, ought not this very timidity, founded (as in part at least it was) upon inexperience and conscious inability to face the dangers of the world, to have suggested reasons for not leaving her to her own protection? And does it not argue, on my part, an arrogant or too blind a confidence in the durability of my happiness, as though charmed against assaults, and liable to no shocks of sudden revolution? I reply that, from the very constitution of society, and the tone of manners in the city which we inhabited, there seemed to be a moral impossibility that any dangers of consequence should meet her in the course of those brief absences from my protection, which only were possible; that even to herself any dangers, of a nature to be anticipated under the known circumstances of the case, seemed almost imaginary; that even *she* acknowledged a propriety in being trained, by slight and brief separations from my guardianship, to face more boldly those cases of longer separation and of more

absolute consignment to her own resources which circumstances might arise to create necessarily, and perhaps abruptly. And it is evident that, had she been the wife of any man engaged in the duties of a profession, she might have been summoned from the very first, and without the possibility of any such gradual training, to the necessity of relying almost singly upon her own courage and discretion. For the other question, whether I did not depend too blindly and presumptuously upon my good luck in not at least affording her my protection so long as nothing occurred to make it impossible? I may reply, most truly, that all my feelings ran naturally in the very opposite channel. So far from confiding too much in my luck, in the present instance I was engaged in a task of writing upon some points of business which could not admit of further delay; but now, and at all times, I had a secret aversion to seeing so gentle a creature thrown even for an hour upon her own resources, though in situations which scarcely seemed to admit of any occasion for taxing those resources; and often I have felt anger towards myself for what appeared to be an irrational or effeminate timidity, and have struggled with my own mind upon occasions like the present, when I knew that I could not have acknowledged my tremors to a friend without something like shame, and a fear to excite his ridicule. No; if in anything I ran into excess, it was in this very point of anxiety as to all that regarded my wife's security. Her good sense, her prudence, her courage, (for courage she had in the midst of her timidity,) her dignity of manner, the more impressive from the

childlike character of her countenance, all should have combined to reassure me, and yet they did not. I was still anxious for her safety to an irrational extent; and to sum up the whole in a most weighty line of Shakspeare, I lived under the constant presence of a feeling which only that great observer of human nature (so far as I am aware) has ever noticed, viz., that merely the excess of my happiness made me jealous of its ability to last, and in that extent less capable of enjoying it; that in fact the prelibation of my tears, as a homage to its fragility, was drawn forth by my very sense that my felicity was too exquisite; or, in the words of the great master

'I wept to have' [absolutely, by anticipation, shed tears in possessing] 'what I so feared to lose.'

Thus end my explanations, and I now pursue my narrative: Agnes, as I have said, came into my room again before leaving the house—we conversed for five minutes—we parted—she went out—her last words being that she would return at half-past one o'clock; and not long after that time, if ever mimic bells—bells of rejoicing, or bells of mourning, are heard in desert spaces of the air, and (as some have said) in unreal worlds, that mock our own, and repeat, for ridicule, the vain and unprofitable motions of man, then too surely, about this hour, began to toll the funeral knell of my earthly happiness—its final hour had sounded.

* * * * *

One o'clock had arrived; fifteen minutes after, I strolled into the garden, and began to look over the little garden-gate in expectation of every moment descrying Agnes in the distance. Half an hour passed, and for ten minutes more I was tolerably quiet. From this time till half- past two I became constantly more agitated—*agitated,* perhaps, is too strong a word—but I was restless and anxious beyond what I should have chosen to acknowledge. Still I kept arguing, What is half an hour? what is an hour? A thousand things might have occurred to cause that delay, without needing to suppose any accident; or, if an accident, why not a very trifling one? She may have slightly hurt her foot—she may have slightly sprained her ankle. 'Oh, doubtless,' I exclaimed to myself, 'it will be a mere trifle, or perhaps nothing at all.' But I remember that, even whilst I was saying this, I took my hat and walked with nervous haste into the little quiet lane upon which our garden-gate opened. The lane led by a few turnings, and after a course of about five hundred yards, into a broad high-road, which even at that day had begun to assume the character of a street, and allowed an unobstructed range of view in the direction of the city for at least a mile. Here I stationed myself, for the air was so clear that I could distinguish dress and figure to a much greater distance than usual. Even on such a day, however, the remote distance

was hazy and indistinct, and at any other season I should have been diverted with the various mistakes I made. From occasional combinations of color, modified by light and shade, and of course powerfully assisted by the creative state of the eye under this nervous apprehensiveness, I continued to shape into images of Agnes forms without end, that upon nearer approach presented the most grotesque contrasts to her impressive appearance. But I had ceased even to comprehend the ludicrous; my agitation was now so overruling and engrossing that I lost even my intellectual sense of it; and now first I understood practically and feelingly the anguish of hope alternating with disappointment, as it may be supposed to act upon the poor shipwrecked seaman, alone and upon a desolate coast, straining his sight for ever to the fickle element which has betrayed him, but which only can deliver him, and with his eyes still tracing in the far distance,

'Ships, dim-discover'd, dropping from the clouds,'—

which a brief interval of suspense still for ever disperses into hollow pageants of air or vapor. One deception melted away only to be succeeded by another; still I fancied that at last to a certainty I could descry the tall figure of Agnes, her gipsy hat, and even the peculiar elegance of her walk. Often I went so far as to laugh at myself, and even to tax my recent fears with unmanliness and effeminacy, on recollecting the audible throbbings of my heart, and the nervous palpitations which had besieged me; but these symptoms, whether effeminate or not, began to come back tumultuously under the gloomy doubts that

succeeded almost before I had uttered this self-reproach. Still I found myself mocked and deluded with false hopes; yet still I renewed my quick walk, and the intensity of my watch for that radiant form that was fated never more to be seen returning from the cruel city.

It was nearly half-past three, and therefore close upon two hours beyond the time fixed by Agnes for her return, when I became absolutely incapable of supporting the further torture of suspense, and I suddenly took the resolution of returning home and concerting with my female servants some energetic measures, though *what* I could hardly say, on behalf of their mistress. On entering the garden-gate I met our little child Francis, who unconsciously inflicted a pang upon me which he neither could have meditated nor have understood. I passed him at his play, perhaps even unaware of his presence, but he recalled me to that perception by crying aloud that he had just seen his mamma.

'When—where?' I asked convulsively.

'Up stairs in her bedroom,' was his instantaneous answer.

His manner was such as forbade me to suppose that he could be joking; and, as it was barely possible (though, for reasons well known to me, in the highest degree improbable) that Agnes might have returned by a by-path, which, leading through a dangerous and disreputable suburb, would not have coincided at any one point with the public road where I had been keeping my station. I sprang forward into the house, up stairs, and in rapid succession

into every room where it was likely that she might be found; but everywhere there was a dead silence, disturbed only by myself, for, in my growing confusion of thought, I believe that I rang the bell violently in every room I entered. No such summons, however, was needed, for the servants, two of whom at the least were most faithful creatures, and devotedly attached to their young mistress, stood ready of themselves to come and make inquiries of me as soon as they became aware of the alarming fact, that I had returned without her.

Until this moment, though having some private reasons for surprise that she should have failed to come into the house for a minute or two at the hour prefixed, in order to make some promised domestic arrangements for the day, they had taken it for granted that she must have met with me at some distance from home—and that either the extreme beauty of the day had beguiled her of all petty household recollections, or (as a conjecture more in harmony with past experiences) that my impatience and solicitations had persuaded her to lay aside her own plans for the moment at the risk of some little domestic inconvenience. Now, however, in a single instant vanished *every* mode of accounting for their mistress's absence; and the consternation of our looks communicated contagiously, by the most unerring of all languages, from each to the other what thoughts were uppermost in our panic-stricken hearts. If to any person it should seem that our alarm was disproportioned to the occasion, and not justified at least by anything as yet made

known to us, let that person consider the weight due to the two following facts: First, that from the recency of our settlement in this neighborhood, and from the extreme seclusion of my wife's previous life at a vast distance from the metropolis, she had positively no friends on her list of visitors who resided in this great capital; secondly, and far above all beside, let him remember the awful denunciations, so unexpectedly tallying with this alarming and mysterious absence, of the Hungarian prophetess; these had been slighted—almost dismissed from our thoughts; but now in sudden reaction they came back upon us with a frightful power to lacerate and to sting—the shadowy outline of a spiritual agency, such as that which could at all predict the events, combining in one mysterious effect, with the shadowy outline of those very predictions. The power, that could have predicted, was as dim and as hard to grasp as was the precise nature of the evil that had been predicted.

An icy terror froze my blood at this moment when I looked at the significant glances, too easily understood by me, that were exchanged between the servants. My mouth had been for the last two hours growing more and more parched, so that at present, from mere want of moisture, I could not separate my lips to speak. One of the women saw the vain efforts I was making, and hastily brought me a glass of water. With the first recovery of speech, I asked them what little Francis had meant by saying that he had seen his mother in her bedroom. Their reply was, that they were as much at a loss to discover his meaning as I was;

that he had made the same assertion to them, and with so much earnestness, that they had, all in succession, gone up stairs to look for her, and with the fullest expectation of finding her. This was a mystery which remained such to the very last; there was no doubt whatsoever that the child believed himself to have seen his mother; that he could not have seen her in her human bodily presence, there is as little doubt as there is, alas! that in this world he never *did* see her again. The poor child constantly adhered to his story, and with a circumstantiality far beyond all power of invention that could be presumed in an artless infant. Every attempt at puzzling him or entangling him in contradictions by means of cross-examination was but labor thrown away; though indeed, it is true enough that for those attempts, as will soon be seen, there was but a brief interval allowed.

Not dwelling upon this subject at present, I turned to Hannah —a woman who held the nominal office of cook in our little establishment, but whose real duties had been much more about her mistress's person—and with a searching look of appeal I asked her whether, in this moment of trial, when (as she might see) I was not so perfectly master of myself as perhaps always to depend upon seeing what was best to be done, she would consent to accompany me into the city, and take upon herself those obvious considerations of policy or prudence which might but too easily escape my mind, darkened, and likely to be darkened, as to its power of discernment by the hurricane of affliction now too probably at hand. She answered my appeal with the fervor I

expected from what I had already known of her character. She was a woman of a strong, fiery, perhaps I might say of heroic mind, supported by a courage that was absolutely indomitable, and by a strength of bodily frame very unusual in a woman, and beyond the promise even of her person. She had suffered as deep a wrench in her own affections as a human being can suffer; she had lost her one sole child, a fair-haired boy of most striking beauty and interesting disposition, at the age of seventeen, and by the worst of all possible fates; he lived (as we did at that time) in a large commercial city overflowing with profligacy, and with temptations of every order; he had been led astray; culpable he had been, but by very much the least culpable of the set into which accident had thrown him, as regarded acts and probable intentions; and as regarded palliations from childish years, from total inexperience, or any other alleviating circumstances that could be urged, having everything to plead—and of all his accomplices the only one who had anything to plead. Interest, however, he had little or none; and whilst some hoary villains of the party, who happened to be more powerfully befriended, were finally allowed to escape with a punishment little more than nominal, he and two others were selected as sacrifices to the offended laws. They suffered capitally. All three behaved well; but the poor boy in particular, with a courage, a resignation, and a meekness, so distinguished and beyond his years as to attract the admiration and the liveliest sympathy of the public universally. If strangers could feel in that way, if the mere hardened executioner

could be melted at the final scene,—it may be judged to what a fierce and terrific height would ascend the affliction of a doating mother, constitutionally too fervid in her affections. I have heard an official person declare, that the spectacle of her desolation and frantic anguish was the most frightful thing he had ever witnessed, and so harrowing to the feelings, that all who could by their rank venture upon such an irregularity, absented themselves during the critical period from the office which corresponded with the government; for, as I have said, the affair took place in a large provincial city, at a great distance from the capital. All who knew this woman, or who were witnesses to the alteration which one fortnight had wrought in her person as well as her demeanor, fancied it impossible that she could continue to live; or that, if she did, it must be through the giving way of her reason. They proved, however, to be mistaken; or, at least, if (as some thought) her reason did suffer in some degree, this result showed itself in the inequality of her temper, in moody fits of abstraction, and the morbid energy of her manner at times under the absence of all adequate external excitement, rather than in any positive and apparent hallucinations of thought. The charm which had mainly carried off the instant danger to her faculties, was doubtless the intense sympathy which she met with. And in these offices of consolation my wife stood foremost. For, and that was fortunate, she had found herself able, without violence to her own sincerest opinions in the case, to offer precisely that form of sympathy which was most soothing to the angry irritation of the

poor mother; not only had she shown a *direct* interest in the boy, and not a mere interest of *reflection* from that which she took in the mother, and had expressed it by visits to his dungeon, and by every sort of attention to his comforts which his case called for, or the prison regulations allowed; not only had she wept with the distracted woman as if for a brother of her own; but, which went farther than all the rest in softening the mother's heart, she had loudly and indignantly proclaimed her belief in the boy's innocence, and in the same tone her sense of the crying injustice committed as to the selection of the victims, and the proportion of the punishment awarded. Others, in the language of a great poet,

'Had pitied *her,* and not her grief;'

they had either not been able to see, or, from carelessness, had neglected to see, any peculiar wrong done to her in the matter which occasioned her grief,—but had simply felt compassion for her as for one summoned, in a regular course of providential and human dispensation, to face an affliction, heavy in itself, but not heavy from any special defect of equity. Consequently their very sympathy, being so much built upon the assumption that an only child had offended to the extent implied in his sentence, oftentimes clothed itself in expressions which she felt to be not consolations but insults, and, in fact, so many justifications of those whom it relieved her overcharged heart to regard as the very worst of enemies. Agnes, on the other hand, took the very same view of the case as herself; and, though otherwise the

gentlest of all gentle creatures, yet here, from the generous fervor of her reverence for justice, and her abhorrence of oppression, she gave herself no trouble to moderate the energy of her language: nor did I, on my part, feeling that substantially she was in the right, think it of importance to dispute about the exact degrees of the wrong done or the indignation due to it. In this way it happened naturally enough that at one and the same time, though little contemplating either of these results, Agnes had done a prodigious service to the poor desolate mother by breaking the force of her misery, as well as by arming the active agencies of indignation against the depressing ones of solitary grief, and for herself had won a most grateful and devoted friend, who would have gone through fire and water to serve her, and was thenceforwards most anxious for some opportunity to testify how deep had been her sense of the goodness shown to her by her benign young mistress, and how incapable of suffering abatement by time. It remains to add, which I have slightly noticed before, that this woman was of unusual personal strength: her bodily frame matched with her intellectual: and I notice this *now* with the more emphasis, because I am coming rapidly upon ground where it will be seen that this one qualification was of more summary importance to us—did us more 'yeoman's service' at a crisis the most awful—than other qualities of greater name and pretension. *Hannah* was this woman's Christian name; and her name and her memory are to me amongst the most hallowed of my earthly recollections.

One of her two fellow-servants, known technically amongst us as the 'parlor maid,' was also, but not equally, attached to her mistress; and merely because her nature, less powerfully formed and endowed, did not allow her to entertain or to comprehend any service equally fervid of passion or of impassioned action. She, however, was good, affectionate, and worthy to be trusted. But a third there was, a nursery maid, and therefore more naturally and more immediately standing within the confidence of her mistress —her I could not trust: her I suspected. But of that hereafter. Meantime, Hannah, she upon whom I leaned as upon a staff in all which respected her mistress, ran up stairs, after I had spoken and received her answer, in order hastily to dress and prepare herself for going out along with me to the city. I did not ask her to be quick in her movements: I knew there was no need: and, whilst she was absent, I took up, in one of my fretful movements of nervousness, a book which was lying upon a side-table: the book fell open of itself at a particular page; and in that, perhaps, there was nothing extraordinary, for it was a little portable edition of *Paradise Lost*; and the page was one which I must naturally have turned to many a time: for to Agnes I had read all the great masters of literature, especially those of modern times; so that few people knew the high classics more familiarly: and as to the passage in question, from its divine beauty I had read it aloud to her, perhaps, on fifty separate occasions. All this I mention to take away any appearance of a vulgar attempt to create omens; but still, in the very act of

confessing the simple truth, and thus weakening the marvellous character of the anecdote, I must notice it as a strange instance of the '*Sortes Miltonianæ*,'—that precisely at such a moment as this I should find thrown in my way, should feel tempted to take up, and should open, a volume containing such a passage as the following: and observe, moreover, that although the volume, *once being taken up*, would naturally open where it had been most frequently read, there were, however, many passages which had been read *as* frequently—or more so. The particular passage upon which I opened at this moment was that most beautiful one in which the fatal morning separation is described between Adam and his bride—that separation so pregnant with wo, which eventually proved the occasion of the mortal transgression—the last scene between our first parents at which both were innocent and both were happy—although the superior intellect already felt, and, in the slight altercation preceding this separation, had already expressed a dim misgiving of some coming change: these are the words, and in depth of pathos they have rarely been approached: —

> 'Oft he to her his charge of quick return
> Repeated; she to him as oft engag'd
> To be returned by noon amid the bow'r,
> And all things in best order to invite
> Noon-tide repast, or afternoon's repose.
> Oh much deceived, much failing, hapless Eve!
> Of thy presumed return, event perverse!

Thou never from that hour in Paradise
Found'st either sweet repast, or sound repose.'

'*My* Eve!' I exclaimed, 'partner in *my* paradise, where art thou? *Much failing* thou wilt not be found, nor *much deceived*; innocent in any case thou art; but, alas! too surely by this time *hapless*, and the victim of some diabolic wickedness.' Thus I murmured to myself; thus I ejaculated; thus I apostrophized my Agnes; then again came a stormier mood. I could not sit still; I could not stand in quiet; I threw the book from me with violence against the wall; I began to hurry backwards and forwards in a short uneasy walk, when suddenly a sound, a step; it was the sound of the garden-gate opening, followed by a hasty tread. Whose tread? Not for a moment could it be fancied the oread step which belonged to that daughter of the hills—my wife, my Agnes; no, it was the dull massy tread of a man: and immediately there came a loud blow upon the door, and in the next moment, the bell having been found, a furious peal of ringing. Oh coward heart! not for a lease of immortality could I have gone forwards myself. My breath failed me; an interval came in which respiration seemed to be stifled—the blood to halt in its current; and then and there I recognised in myself the force and living truth of that Scriptural description of a heart consciously beset by evil without escape: 'Susannah *sighed*.' Yes, a long, long sigh—a deep, deep sigh—that is, the natural language by which the over-charged heart utters forth the wo that else would break it. I sighed—oh

how profoundly! But that did not give me power to move. Who will go to the door? I whispered audibly. Who is at the door? was the inaudible whisper of my heart. Then might be seen the characteristic differences of the three women. That one, whom I suspected, I heard raising an upper window to look out and reconnoitre. The affectionate Rachael, on the other hand, ran eagerly down stairs; but Hannah, half dressed, even her bosom exposed, passed her like a storm; and before I heard any sound of opening a door, I saw from the spot where I stood the door already wide open, and a man in the costume of a policeman. All that he said I could not hear; but this I heard— that I was wanted at the police office, and had better come off without delay. He seemed then to get a glimpse of me, and to make an effort towards coming nearer; but I slunk away, and left to Hannah the task of drawing from him any circumstances which he might know. But apparently there was not much to tell, or rather, said I, there is too much, the *much* absorbs the *many*; some one mighty evil transcends and quells all particulars. At length the door was closed, and the man was gone. Hannah crept slowly along the passage, and looked in hesitatingly. Her very movements and stealthy pace testified that she had heard nothing which, even by comparison, she could think good news. 'Tell me not now, Hannah,' I said; 'wait till we are in the open air.' She went up stairs again. How short seemed the time till she descended! how I longed for further respite! 'Hannah!' I said at length when we were fairly moving upon the road, 'Hannah! I am

too sure you have nothing good to tell. But now tell me the worst, and let that be in the fewest words possible.'

'Sir,' she said, 'we had better wait until we reach the office; for really I could not understand the man. He says that my mistress is detained upon some charge; but *what*, I could not at all make out. He was a man that knew something of you, Sir, I believe, and he wished to be civil, and kept saying, "Oh! I dare say it will turn out nothing at all, many such charges are made idly and carelessly, and some maliciously." "But what charges?" I cried, and then he wanted to speak privately to you. But I told him that of all persons he must not speak to you, if he had anything painful to tell; for that you were too much disturbed already, and had been for some hours, out of anxiety and terror about my mistress, to bear much more. So, when he heard that, he was less willing to speak freely than before. He might prove wrong, he said; he might give offence; things might turn out far otherwise than according to first appearances; for his part, he could not believe anything amiss of so sweet a lady. And after all, it would be better to wait till we reached the office.'

Thus much then was clear—Agnes was under some accusation. This was already worse than the worst I had anticipated. 'And then,' said I, thinking aloud to Hannah, 'one of two things is apparent to me; either the accusation is one of pure hellish malice, without a color of probability or the shadow of a foundation, and that way, alas! I am driven in my fears by that Hungarian woman's prophecy; or, which but for my desponding

heart I should be more inclined to think, the charge has grown out of my poor wife's rustic ignorance as to the usages then recently established by law with regard to the kind of money that could be legally tendered. This, however, was a suggestion that did not tend to alleviate my anxiety; and my nervousness had mounted to a painful, almost to a disabling degree, by the time we reached the office. Already on our road thither some parties had passed us who were conversing with eagerness upon the case: so much we collected from the many and ardent expressions about 'the lady's beauty,' though the rest of such words as we could catch were ill calculated to relieve my suspense. This, then, at least, was certain —that my poor timid Agnes had already been exhibited before a tumultuous crowd; that her name and reputation had gone forth as a subject of discussion for the public; and that the domestic seclusion and privacy within which it was her matronly privilege to move had already undergone a rude violation.

The office, and all the purlieus of the office, were occupied by a dense crowd. That, perhaps, was always the case, more or less, at this time of day; but at present the crowd was manifestly possessed by a more than ordinary interest; and there was a unity in this possessing interest; all were talking on the same subject, the case in which Agnes had so recently appeared in some character or other; and by this time it became but too certain in the character of an accused person. Pity was the prevailing sentiment amongst the mob; but the opinions varied much as to the probable criminality of the prisoner. I

made my way into the office. The presiding magistrates had all retired for the afternoon, and would not reassemble until eight o'clock in the evening. Some clerks only or officers of the court remained, who were too much harassed by applications for various forms and papers connected with the routine of public business, and by other official duties which required signatures or attestations, to find much leisure for answering individual questions. Some, however, listened with a marked air of attention to my earnest request for the circumstantial details of the case, but finally referred me to a vast folio volume, in which were entered all the charges, of whatever nature, involving any serious tendency—in fact, all that exceeded a misdemeanor—in the regular chronological succession according to which they came before the magistrate. Here, in this vast calendar of guilt and misery, amidst the *aliases* or cant designations of ruffians, prostitutes, felons, stood the description, at full length, Christian and surnames all properly registered, of my Agnes—of her whose very name had always sounded to my ears like the very echo of mountain innocence, purity, and pastoral simplicity. Here in another column stood the name and residence of her accuser. I shall call him *Barratt*, for that was amongst his names, and a name by which he had at one period of his infamous life been known to the public, though not his principal name, or the one which he had thought fit to assume at this era. James Barratt, then, as I shall here call him, was a haberdasher—keeping a large and conspicuous shop in a very crowded and

what was then considered a fashionable part of the city. The charge was plain and short. Did I live to read it? It accused Agnes M—— of having on that morning secreted in her muff, and feloniously carried away, a valuable piece of Mechlin lace, the property of James Barratt. And the result of the first examination was thus communicated in a separate column, written in red ink—'Remanded to the second day after to-morrow for final examination.' Everything in this sin-polluted register was in manuscript; but at night the records of each day were regularly transferred to a printed journal, enlarged by comments and explanatory descriptions from some one of the clerks, whose province it was to furnish this intelligence to the public journals. On that same night, therefore, would go forth to the world such an account of the case, and such a description of my wife's person, as would inevitably summon to the next exhibition of her misery, as by special invitation and advertisement, the whole world of this vast metropolis—the idle, the curious, the brutal, the hardened amateur in spectacles of wo, and the benign philanthropist who frequents such scenes with the purpose of carrying alleviation to their afflictions. All alike, whatever might be their motives or the spirit of their actions, would rush (as to some grand festival of curiosity and sentimental luxury) to this public martyrdom of my innocent wife.

Meantime, what was the first thing to be done? Manifestly, to see Agnes: her account of the affair might suggest the steps to be taken. Prudence, therefore, at any rate, prescribed this course;

and my heart would not have tolerated any other. I applied, therefore, at once, for information as to the proper mode of effecting this purpose without delay. What was my horror at learning that, by a recent regulation of all the police-offices, under the direction of the public minister who presided over that department of the national administration, no person could be admitted to an interview with any accused party during the progress of the official examinations; or, in fact, until the final committal of the prisoner for trial. This rule was supposed to be attended by great public advantages, and had rarely been relaxed— never, indeed, without a special interposition of the police minister authorizing its suspension. But was the exclusion absolute and universal? Might not, at least, a female servant, simply as the bearer of such articles as were indispensable to female delicacy and comfort, have access to her mistress? No; the exclusion was total and unconditional. To argue the point was manifestly idle; the subordinate officers had no discretion in the matter; nor, in fact, had any other official person, whatever were his rank, except the supreme one; and to him I neither had any obvious means of introduction, nor (in case of obtaining such an introduction) any chance of success; for the spirit of the rule, I foresaw it would be answered, applied with especial force to cases like the present.

Mere human feelings of pity, sympathy with my too visible agitation, superadded to something of perhaps reverence for the blighting misery that was now opening its artillery upon me—

for misery has a privilege, and everywhere is felt to be a holy thing—had combined to procure for me some attention and some indulgence hitherto. Answers had been given with precision, explanations made at length, and anxiety shown to satisfy my inquiries. But this could not last; the inexorable necessities of public business coming back in a torrent upon the official people after this momentary interruption, forbade them to indulge any further consideration for an individual case, and I saw that I must not stay any longer. I was rapidly coming to be regarded as a hinderance to the movement of public affairs; and the recollection that I might again have occasion for some appeal to these men in their official characters, admonished me not to abuse my privilege of the moment. After returning thanks, therefore, for the disposition shown to oblige me, I retired.

Slowly did I and Hannah retrace our steps. Hannah sustained, in the tone of her spirits, by the extremity of her anger, a mood of feeling which I did not share. Indignation was to her in the stead of consolation and hope. I, for my part, could not seek even a momentary shelter from my tempestuous affliction in that temper of mind. The man who could accuse my Agnes, and accuse her of such a crime, I felt to be a monster; and in my thoughts he was already doomed to a bloody atonement (atonement! alas! what atonement!) whenever the time arrived that *her* cause would not be prejudiced, or the current of public feeling made to turn in his favor by investing him with the semblance of an injured or suffering person. So much was settled

in my thoughts with the stern serenity of a decree issuing from a judgment-seat. But that gave no relief, no shadow of relief, to the misery which was now consuming me. Here was an end, in one hour, to the happiness of a life. In one hour it had given way, root and branch—had melted like so much frost-work, or a pageant of vapory exhalations. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, and yet for ever and ever, I comprehended the total ruin of my situation. The case, as others might think, was yet in suspense; and there was room enough for very rational hopes, especially where there was an absolute certainty of innocence. Total freedom from all doubt on that point seemed to justify almost more than hopes. This might be said, and most people would have been more or less consoled by it. I was not. I felt as certain, as irredeemably, as hopelessly certain of the final results as though I had seen the record in the books of Heaven. 'Hope nothing,' I said to myself; 'think not of hope in this world, but think only how best to walk steadily, and not to reel like a creature wanting discourse of reason, or incapable of religious hopes under the burden which it has pleased God to impose, and which in this life cannot be shaken off. The countenance of man is made to look upward and to the skies. Thither also point henceforwards your heart and your thoughts. Never again let your thoughts travel earthwards. Settle them on the heavens, to which your Agnes is already summoned. The call is clear, and not to be mistaken. Little in *her* fate now depends upon you, or upon anything that man can do. Look, therefore, to yourself; see

that you make not shipwreck of your heavenly freight because your earthly freight is lost; and miss not, by any acts of wild and presumptuous despair, that final reunion with your Agnes, which can only be descried through vistas that open through the heavens.'

Such were the thoughts, thoughts often made audible, which came spontaneously like oracles from afar, as I strode homewards with Hannah by my side. Her, meantime, I seemed to hear; for at times I seemed and I intended to answer her. But answer her I did not; for not ten words of all that she said did I really and consciously hear. How I went through that night is more entirely a blank in my memory, more entirely a chapter of chaos and the confusion of chaos, than any other passage the most impressive in my life. If I even slumbered for a moment, as at intervals I did sometimes, though never sitting down, but standing or pacing about throughout the night, and if in this way I attained a momentary respite from self-consciousness, no sooner had I reached this enviable state of oblivion, than some internal sting of irritation *as* rapidly dispersed the whole fickle fabric of sleep; and as if the momentary trance—this fugitive beguilement of my wo—had been conceded by a demon's subtle malice only with the purpose of barbing the pang, by thus forcing it into a stronger relief through the insidious peace preceding it. It is a well known and most familiar experience to all the sons and daughters of affliction, that under no circumstances is the piercing, lancinating torment of a recent calamity felt so keenly

as in the first moments of awaking in the morning from the night's slumbers. Just at the very instant when the clouds of sleep, and the whole fantastic illusions of dreaminess are dispersing, just as the realities of life are re-assuming their steadfast forms — re-shaping themselves—and settling anew into those fixed relations which they are to preserve throughout the waking hours; in that particular crisis of transition from the unreal to the real, the wo which besieges the brain and the life-springs at the heart rushes in afresh amongst the other crowd of realities, and has at the moment of restoration literally the force and liveliness of a new birth—the very same pang, and no whit feebler, as that which belonged to it when it was first made known. From the total hush of oblivion which had buried it and sealed it up, as it were, during the sleeping hours, it starts into sudden life on our first awaking, and is to all intents and purposes a new and not an old affliction—one which brings with it the old original shock which attended its first annunciation.

That night—that first night of separation from my wife —*how* it passed, I know not; I know only *that* it passed, I being in our common bed-chamber, that holiest of all temples that are consecrated to human attachments, whenever the heart is pure of man and woman, and the love is strong—I being in that bedchamber, once the temple now the sepulchre of our happiness,—I there, and my wife—my innocent wife—in a dungeon. As the morning light began to break, somebody knocked at the door; it was Hannah: she took my hand—misery

levels all feeble distinctions of station, sex, age—she noticed my excessive feverishness, and gravely remonstrated with me upon the necessity there was that I should maintain as much health as possible for the sake of 'others,' if not for myself. She then brought me some tea, which refreshed me greatly; for I had tasted nothing at all beyond a little water since the preceding morning's breakfast. This refreshment seemed to relax and thaw the stiff frozen state of cheerless, rayless despair in which I had passed the night; I became susceptible of consolation— that consolation which lies involved in kindness and gentleness of manner—if not susceptible more than before of any positive hope. I sat down; and, having no witnesses to my weakness but this kind and faithful woman, I wept, and I found a relief in tears; and she, with the ready sympathy of woman, wept along with me. All at once she ventured upon the circumstances (so far as she had been able to collect them from the reports of those who had been present at the examination) of our calamity. There was little indeed either to excite or to gratify any interest or curiosity separate from the *personal* interest inevitably connected with a case to which there were two such parties as a brutal, sensual, degraded ruffian, on one side in character of accuser, and on the other as defendant, a meek angel of a woman, timid and fainting from the horrors of her situation, and under the licentious gaze of the crowd—yet, at the same time, bold in conscious innocence, and in the very teeth of the suspicions which beset her, winning the good opinion, as well as the good wishes of all who saw her. There had been at

this first examination little for her to say beyond the assigning her name, age, and place of abode; and here it was fortunate that her own excellent good sense concurred with her perfect integrity and intuitive hatred of all indirect or crooked courses in prompting her to an undisguised statement of the simple truth, without a momentary hesitation or attempt either at evasion or suppression. With equally good intentions in similar situations many a woman has seriously injured her cause by slight evasions of the entire truth, where nevertheless her only purpose has been the natural and ingenuous one of seeking to save the reputation untainted of a name which she felt to have been confided to her keeping. The purpose was an honorable one, but erroneously pursued. Agnes fell into no such error. She answered calmly, simply, and truly, to every question put by the magistrates; and beyond *that* there was little opportunity for her to speak; the whole business of this preliminary examination being confined to the deposition of the accuser as to the circumstances under which he alleged the act of felonious appropriation to have taken place. These circumstances were perfectly uninteresting, considered in themselves; but amongst them was one which to us had the most shocking interest, from the absolute proof thus furnished of a deep-laid plot against Agnes. But for this one circumstance there would have been a possibility that the whole had originated in error—error growing out of and acting upon a nature originally suspicious, and confirmed perhaps by an unfortunate experience. And in proportion as that was possible,

the chances increased that the accuser might, as the examinations advanced, and the winning character of the accused party began to develop itself, begin to see his error, and to retract his own over-hasty suspicions. But now we saw at a glance that for this hope there was no countenance whatever, since one solitary circumstance sufficed to establish a conspiracy. The deposition bore—that the lace had been secreted and afterwards detected in a muff; now it was a fact as well known to both of us as the fact of Agnes having gone out at all—that she had laid aside her winter's dress for the first time on this genial sunny day. Muff she had not at the time, nor could have had appropriately from the style of her costume in other respects. What was the effect upon us of this remarkable discovery! Of course there died at once the hope of any abandonment by the prosecutor of his purpose; because here was proof of a predetermined plot. This hope died at once; but then, as it was one which never had presented itself to my mind, I lost nothing by which I had ever been solaced. On the other hand, it will be obvious that a new hope at the same time arose to take its place, viz., the reasonable one that by this single detection, if once established, we might raise a strong presumption of conspiracy, and moreover that, as a leading fact or clue, it might serve to guide us in detecting others. Hannah was sanguine in this expectation; and for a moment her hopes were contagiously exciting to mine. But the hideous despondency which in my mind had settled upon the whole affair from the very first, the superstitious presentiment I had of a total blight

brooding over the entire harvest of my life and its promises, (tracing itself originally, I am almost ashamed to own, up to that prediction of the Hungarian woman)—denied me steady light, anything—all in short but a wandering ray of hope. It was right, of course, nay, indispensable, that the circumstance of the muff should be strongly insisted upon at the next examination, pressed against the prosecutor, and sifted to the uttermost. An able lawyer would turn this to a triumphant account; and it would be admirable as a means of pre- engaging the good opinion as well as the sympathies of the public in behalf of the prisoner. But, for its final effect—my conviction remained, not to be shaken, that all would be useless; that our doom had gone forth, and was irrevocable.

Let me not linger too much over those sad times. Morning came on as usual; for it is strange, but true, that to the very wretched it seems wonderful that times and seasons should keep their appointed courses in the midst of such mighty overthrows, and such interruption to the courses of their own wonted happiness and their habitual expectations. Why should morning and night, why should all movements in the natural world be so regular, whilst in the moral world all is so irregular and anomalous? Yet the sun and the moon rise and set as usual upon the mightiest revolutions of empire and of worldly fortune that this planet ever beholds; and it is sometimes even a comfort to know that this will be the case. A great criminal, sentenced to an agonizing punishment, has derived a fortitude and a consolation

from recollecting that the day would run its inevitable course —that a day after all was *but* a day—that the mighty wheel of alternate light and darkness must and would revolve—and that the evening star would rise as usual, and shine with its untroubled lustre upon the dust and ashes of what *had* indeed suffered, and so recently, the most bitter pangs, but would then have ceased to suffer. 'La Journée,' said Damien,

'La journée sera dure, mais elle se passera.'

'——*Se passera*:' yes, that is true, I whispered to myself; my day also, my season of trial will be hard to bear; but that also will have an end; that also '*se passera*.' Thus I talked or thought so long as I thought at all; for the hour was now rapidly approaching, when thinking in any shape would for some time be at an end for me.

That day, as the morning advanced, I went again, accompanied by Hannah, to the police court and to the prison —a vast, ancient, in parts ruinous, and most gloomy pile of building. In those days the administration of justice was, if not more corrupt, certainly in its inferior departments by far more careless than it is at present, and liable to thousands of interruptions and mal-practices, supporting themselves upon old traditionary usages which required at least half a century, and the shattering everywhere given to old systems by the French Revolution, together with the universal energy of mind applied to those subjects over the whole length and breadth of Christendom, to approach with any effectual reforms. Knowing this, and

having myself had direct personal cognisance of various cases in which bribery had been applied with success, I was not without considerable hope that perhaps Hannah and myself might avail ourselves of this irregular passport through the gates of the prison. And, had the new regulation been of somewhat longer standing, there is little doubt that I should have been found right; unfortunately, as yet it had all the freshness of newborn vigor, and kept itself in remembrance by the singular irritation it excited. Besides this, it was a pet novelty of one particular minister, new to the possession of power, anxious to distinguish himself, proud of his creative functions within the range of his office, and very sensitively jealous on the point of opposition to his mandates. Vain, therefore, on this day were all my efforts to corrupt the jailers; and, in fact, anticipating a time when I might have occasion to corrupt some of them for a more important purpose and on a larger scale, I did not think it prudent to proclaim my character beforehand as one who tampered with such means, and thus to arm against myself those jealousies in official people, which it was so peculiarly important that I should keep asleep.

All that day, however, I lingered about the avenues and vast courts in the precincts of the prison, and near one particular wing of the building, which had been pointed out to me by a jailer as the section allotted to those who were in the situation of Agnes; that is, waiting their final commitment for trial. The building generally he could indicate with certainty, but he professed

himself unable to indicate the particular part of it which 'the young woman brought in on the day previous' would be likely to occupy; consequently he could not point out the window from which her cell (her '*cell*!' what a word!) would be lighted. 'But, master,' he went on to say, 'I would advise nobody to try that game.' He looked with an air so significant, and at the same time used a gesture so indicative of private understanding, that I at once apprehended his meaning, and assured him that he had altogether misconstrued my drift; that, as to attempts at escape, or at any mode of communicating with the prisoner from the outside, I trusted all *that* was perfectly needless; and that at any rate in my eyes it was perfectly hopeless. 'Well, master,' he replied, 'that's neither here nor there. You've come down handsomely, that I *will* say; and where a gentleman acts like a gentleman, and behaves himself as such, I'm not the man to go and split upon him for a word. To be sure it's quite nat'ral that a gentleman—put case that a young woman is his fancy woman—it's nothing but nat'ral that he should want to get her out of such an old rat-hole as this, where many's the fine-timbered creature, both he and she, that has lain to rot, and has never got out of the old trap at all, first or last'——'How so?' I interrupted him; 'surely they don't detain the corpses of prisoners?' 'Ay, but mind you —put case that he or that she should die in this rat-trap before sentence is past, why then the prison counts them as its own children, and buries them in its own chapel—that old stack of pigeon-holes that you see up yonder to the right

hand.' So then, after all, thought I, if my poor Agnes should, in her desolation and solitary confinement to these wretched walls, find her frail strength give way—should the moral horrors of her situation work their natural effect upon her health, and she should chance to die within this dungeon, here within this same dungeon will she lie to the resurrection, and in that case her prison-doors have already closed upon her for ever. The man, who perhaps had some rough kindness in his nature, though tainted by the mercenary feelings too inevitably belonging to his situation, seemed to guess at the character of my ruminations by the change of my countenance, for he expressed some pity for my being 'in so much trouble;' and it seemed to increase his respect for me that this trouble should be directed to the case of a woman, for he appeared to have a manly sense of the peculiar appeal made to the honor and gallantry of man, by the mere general fact of the feebleness and the dependence of woman. I looked at him more attentively in consequence of the feeling tone in which he now spoke, and was surprised that I had not more particularly noticed him before; he was a fine looking, youngish man, with a bold Robin-hood style of figure and appearance; and, morally speaking, he was absolutely transfigured to my eyes by the effect worked upon him for the moment, through the simple calling up of his better nature. However, he recurred to his cautions about the peril in a legal sense of tampering with the windows, bolts, and bars of the old decaying prison; which, in fact, precisely according to the degree in which its

absolute power over its prisoners was annually growing less and less, grew more and more jealous of its own reputation, and punished the attempts to break loose with the more severity, in exact proportion as they were the more tempting by the chances of success. I persisted in disowning any schemes of the sort, and especially upon the ground of their hopelessness. But this, on the other hand, was a ground that in his inner thoughts he treated with scorn; and I could easily see that, with a little skilful management of opportunity, I might, upon occasion, draw from him all the secrets he knew as to the special points of infirmity in this old ruinous building. For the present, and until it should certainly appear that there was some use to be derived from this species of knowledge, I forbore to raise superfluous suspicions by availing myself further of his communicative disposition. Taking, however, the precaution of securing his name, together with his particular office and designation in the prison, I parted from him as if to go home, but in fact to resume my sad roamings up and down the precincts of the jail.

What made these precincts much larger than otherwise they would have been, was the circumstance that, by a usage derived from older days, both criminal prisoners and those who were prisoners for debt, equally fell under the custody of this huge caravanserai for the indifferent reception of crime, of misdemeanor, and of misfortune. And those who came under the two first titles, were lodged here through all stages of their connection with public justice; alike when mere objects of vague

suspicion to the police, when under examination upon a specific charge, when fully committed for trial, when convicted and under sentence, awaiting the execution of that sentence, and, in a large proportion of cases, even through their final stage of punishment, when it happened to be of any nature compatible with in-door confinement. Hence it arose that the number of those who haunted the prison gates, with or without a title to admission, was enormous; all the relatives, or more properly the acquaintances and connections of the criminal population within the prison, being swelled by all the families of needy debtors who came daily, either to offer the consolation of their society, or to diminish their common expenditure by uniting their slender establishments. One of the rules applied to the management of this vast multitude that were every day candidates for admission was, that to save the endless trouble as well as risk, perhaps, of opening and shutting the main gates to every successive arrival, periodic intervals were fixed for the admission by wholesale; and as these periods came round every two hours, it would happen at many parts of the day that vast crowds accumulated waiting for the next opening of the gate. These crowds were assembled in two or three large outer courts, in which also were many stalls and booths, kept there upon some local privilege of ancient inheritance, or upon some other plea made good by gifts or bribes—some by Jews and others by Christians, perhaps equally Jewish. Superadded to these stationary elements of this miscellaneous population, were others drawn thither by pure

motives of curiosity, so that altogether an almost permanent mob was gathered together in these courts; and amid this mob it was,—from I know not what definite motive, partly because I thought it probable that amongst these people I should hear the cause of Agnes peculiarly the subject of conversation; and so, in fact, it did really happen,—but partly, and even more, I believe, because I now awfully began to shrink from solitude. Tumult I must have, and distraction of thought. Amid this mob, I say, it was that I passed two days. Feverish I had been from the first—and from bad to worse, in such a case, was, at any rate, a natural progress; but, perhaps, also amongst this crowd of the poor, the abjectly wretched, the ill-fed, the desponding, and the dissolute, there might be very naturally a larger body of contagion lurking than according to their mere numerical expectations. There was at that season a very extensive depopulation going on in some quarters of this great metropolis, and in other cities of the same empire, by means of a very malignant typhus. This fever is supposed to be the peculiar product of jails; and though it had not as yet been felt as a scourge and devastator of this particular jail, or at least the consequent mortality had been hitherto kept down to a moderate amount, yet it was highly probable that a certain quantity of contagion, much beyond the proportion of other popular assemblages less uniformly wretched in their composition, was here to be found all day long; and doubtless my excited state, and irritable habit of body, had offered a peculiar predisposition that favored the rapid development of

this contagion. However this might be, the result was, that on the evening of the second day which I spent in haunting the purlieus of the prison, (consequently the night preceding the second public examination of Agnes,) I was attacked by ardent fever in such unmitigated fury, that before morning I had lost all command of my intellectual faculties. For some weeks I became a pitiable maniac, and in every sense the wreck of my former self; and seven entire weeks, together with the better half of an eighth week, had passed over my head whilst I lay unconscious of time and its dreadful freight of events, excepting in so far as my disordered brain, by its fantastic coinages, created endless mimicries and mockeries of these events—less substantial, but oftentimes less afflicting, or less agitating. It would have been well for me had my destiny decided that I was not to be recalled to this world of wo. But I had no such happiness in store. I recovered, and through twenty and eight years my groans have recorded the sorrow I feel that I did.

* * * * *

I shall not rehearse circumstantially, and point by point, the sad unfolding, as it proceeded through successive revelations to me, of all which had happened during my state of physical incapacity. When I first became aware that my wandering senses had returned to me, and knew, by the cessation of all throbbings, and the unutterable pains that had so long possessed my brain,

that I was now returning from the gates of death, a sad confusion assailed me as to some indefinite cloud of evil that had been hovering over me at the time when I first fell into a state of insensibility. For a time I struggled vainly to recover the lost connection of my thoughts, and I endeavored ineffectually to address myself to sleep. I opened my eyes, but found the glare of light painful beyond measure. Strength, however, it seemed to me that I had, and more than enough, to raise myself out of bed. I made the attempt, but fell back, almost giddy with the effort. At the sound of the disturbance which I had thus made, a woman whom I did not know came from behind a curtain, and spoke to me. Shrinking from any communication with a stranger, especially one whose discretion I could not estimate in making discoveries to me with the requisite caution, I asked her simply what o'clock it was.

'Eleven in the forenoon,' she replied.

'And what day of the month?'

'The second,' was her brief answer.

I felt almost a sense of shame in adding—; 'The second! but of what month?'

'Of June,' was the startling rejoinder.

On the 8th of April I had fallen ill, and it was now actually the 2d of June. Oh! sickening calculation! revolting register of hours! for in that same moment which brought back this one recollection, perhaps by steadying my brain, rushed back in a torrent all the other dreadful remembrances of the period, and

now the more so, because, though the event was still uncertain as regarded my knowledge, it must have become dreadfully certain as regarded the facts of the case, and the happiness of all who were concerned. Alas! one little circumstance too painfully assured me that this event had not been a happy one. Had Agnes been restored to her liberty and her home, where would she have been found but watching at my bed-side? That too certainly I knew, and the inference was too bitter to support.

On this same day, some hours afterwards, upon Hannah's return from the city, I received from her, and heard with perfect calmness, the whole sum of evil which awaited me. Little Francis —she took up her tale at that point—'was with God:' so she expressed herself. He had died of the same fever which had attacked me—had died and been buried nearly five weeks before. Too probably he had caught the infection from me. Almost—such are the caprices of human feeling—almost I could have rejoiced that this young memorial of my vanished happiness had vanished also. It gave me a pang, nevertheless, that the grave should thus have closed upon him before I had seen his fair little face again. But I steeled my heart to hear worse things than this. Next she went on to inform me that already, on the first or second day of our calamity, she had taken upon herself, without waiting for authority, on observing the rapid approaches of illness in me, and arguing the state of helplessness which would follow, to write off at once a summons in the most urgent terms to the brother of my wife. This gentleman, whom I shall call Pierpoint,

was a high-spirited, generous young man as I have ever known. When I say that he was a sportsman, that at one season of the year he did little else than pursue his darling amusement of fox-hunting, for which indeed he had almost a maniacal passion—saying this, I shall already have prejudged him in the opinions of many, who fancy all such persons the slaves of corporeal enjoyments. But, with submission, the truth lies the other way. According to my experience, people of these habits have their bodies more than usually under their command, as being subdued by severe exercise; and their minds, neither better nor worse on an average than those of their neighbors, are more available from being so much more rarely clogged by morbid habits in that uneasy yoke-fellow of the intellectual part—the body. He at all events was a man to justify in his own person this way of thinking; for he was a man not only of sound, but even of bold and energetic intellect, and in all moral respects one whom any man might feel proud to call his friend. This young man, Pierpoint, without delay obeyed the summons; and on being made acquainted with what had already passed, the first step he took was to call upon Barratt, and without further question than what might ascertain his identity, he proceeded to inflict upon him a severe horsewhipping. A worse step on his sister's account he could not have taken. Previously to this the popular feeling had run strongly against Barratt, but now its unity was broken. A new element was introduced into the question: Democratic feelings were armed against this outrage; gentlemen and nobles, it

was said, thought themselves not amenable to justice; and again, the majesty of the law was offended at this intrusion upon an affair already under solemn course of adjudication. Everything, however, passes away under the healing hand of time, and this also faded from the public mind. People remembered also that he was a brother, and in that character, at any rate, had a right to some allowances for his intemperance; and what quickened the oblivion of the affair was, which in itself was sufficiently strange, that Barratt did not revive the case in the public mind by seeking legal reparation for his injuries. It was, however, still matter of regret that Pierpoint should have indulged himself in this movement of passion, since undoubtedly it broke and disturbed the else uniform stream of public indignation, by investing the original aggressor with something like the character of an injured person; and therefore with some set-off to plead against his own wantonness of malice;—his malice might now assume the nobler aspect of revenge.

Thus far, in reporting the circumstances, Hannah had dallied —thus far I had rejoiced that she dallied, with the main burden of the wo; but now there remained nothing to dally with any longer—and she rushed along in her narrative, hurrying to tell —I hurrying to hear. A second, a third examination had ensued, then a final committal—all this within a week. By that time all the world was agitated with the case; literally not the city only, vast as that city was, but the nation was convulsed and divided into parties upon the question, Whether the prosecution were

one of mere malice or not? The very government of the land was reported to be equally interested, and almost equally divided in opinion. In this state of public feeling came the trial. Image to yourself, oh reader, whosoever you are, the intensity of the excitement which by that time had arisen in all people to be spectators of the scene—then image to yourself the effect of all this, a perfect consciousness that in herself as a centre was settled the whole mighty interest of the exhibition—that interest again of so dubious and mixed a character—sympathy in some with mere misfortune—sympathy in others with female frailty and guilt, not perhaps founded upon an absolute unwavering belief in her innocence, even amongst those who were most loud and positive as partisans in affirming it,—and then remember that all this hideous scenical display and notoriety settled upon one whose very nature, constitutionally timid, recoiled with the triple agony of womanly shame—of matronly dignity—of insulted innocence, from every mode and shape of public display. Combine all these circumstances and elements of the case, and you may faintly enter into the situation of my poor Agnes. Perhaps the best way to express it at once is by recurring to the case of a young female Christian martyr, in the early ages of Christianity, exposed in the bloody amphitheatre of Rome or Verona, to 'fight with wild beasts,' as it was expressed in mockery — she to fight the lamb to fight with lions! But in reality the young martyr *had* a fight to maintain, and a fight (in contempt of that cruel mockery) fiercer than the fiercest of her persecutors

could have faced perhaps—the combat with the instincts of her own shrinking, trembling, fainting nature. Such a fight had my Agnes to maintain; and at that time there was a large party of gentlemen in whom the gentlemanly instinct was predominant, and who felt so powerfully the cruel indignities of her situation, that they made a public appeal in her behalf. One thing, and a strong one, which they said, was this:— 'We all talk and move in this case as if, because the question appears doubtful to some people, and the accused party to some people wears a doubtful character, it would follow that she therefore had in reality a mixed character composed in joint proportions of the best and the worst that is imputed to her. But let us not forget that this mixed character belongs not to her, but to the infirmity of our human judgments— *they*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.