MR. LISMORE AND THE WIDOW

WILKIE COLLINS

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Late in the autumn, not many years since, a public meeting was held at the Mansion House, London, under the direction of the Lord Mayor.

The list of gentlemen invited to address the audience had been chosen with two objects in view. Speakers of celebrity, who would rouse public enthusiasm, were supported by speakers connected with commerce, who would be practically useful in explaining the purpose for which the meeting was convened. Money wisely spent in advertising had produced the customary result: every seat was occupied before the proceedings began.

Among the late arrivals, who had no choice but to stand or to leave the hall, were two ladies. One of them at once decided on leaving the hall.

I shall go back to the carriage, she said, and wait for you at the door.

Her friend answered, I sha'n't keep you long. He is advertised to support the second resolution; I want to see him, and that is all.

An elderly gentleman, seated at the end of a bench, rose and offered his place to the lady who remained. She hesitated to take advantage of his kindness, until he reminded her that he had heard what she said to her friend. Before the third resolution was proposed his seat would be at his own disposal again. She thanked him, and without further ceremony took his place. He was provided with an opera−glass, which he more than once offered to her when famous orators appeared on the platform. She made no use of it until a speaker, known in the City as a ship−owner, stepped forward to support the second resolution.

His name (announced in the advertisements) was Ernest Lismore.

The moment he rose the lady asked for the opera−glass. She kept it to her eyes for such a length of time, and with such evident interest in Mr. Lismore, that the curiosity of her neighbours was aroused. Had he anything to say in which a lady (evidently a stranger to him) was personally interested? There was nothing in the address that he delivered which appealed to the enthusiasm of women. He was undoubtedly a handsome man, whose appearance proclaimed him to be in the prime of life, midway, perhaps, between thirty and forty years of age. But why a lady should persist in keeping an opera−glass fixed on him all through his speech was a question which found the general ingenuity at a loss for a reply.

Having returned the glass with an apology, the lady ventured on putting a question next. Did it strike you, sir, that Mr. Lismore seemed to be out of spirits? she asked.

I can't say it did, ma'am.

Perhaps you noticed that he left the platform the moment he had done?

This betrayal of interest in the speaker did not escape the notice of a lady seated on the bench in front. Before the old gentleman could answer she volunteered an explanation.

I am afraid Mr. Lismore is troubled by anxieties connected with his business, she said. My husband heard it reported in the City yesterday that he was seriously embarrassed by the failure −

A loud burst of applause made the end of the sentence inaudible. A famous member of Parliament had risen to propose the third resolution. The polite old man took his seat, and the lady left the hall to join her friend.

Well, Mrs. Callender, has Mr. Lismore disappointed you?

Far from it! But I have heard a report about him which has alarmed me: he is said to be seriously troubled about money matters. How can I find out his address in the City?

We can stop at the first stationer's shop we pass, and ask to look at the directory. Are you going to pay Mr. Lismore a visit?

I am going to think about it.

The next day a clerk entered Mr. Lismore's private room at the office, and presented a visiting−card. Mrs. Callender had reflected, and had arrived at a decision. Underneath her name she had written these explanatory words: An important business.

Does she look as if she wanted money? Mr. Lismore inquired.

Oh dear, no! She comes in her carriage.

Is she young or old?

Old, sir.

To Mr. Lismore, conscious of the disastrous influence occasionally exercised over busy men by youth and beauty, this was a recommendation in itself. He said, Show her in.

Observing the lady as she approached him with the momentary curiosity of a stranger, he noticed that she still preserved the remains of beauty. She had also escaped the misfortune, common to persons at her time of life, of becoming too fat. Even to a man's eye, her dressmaker appeared to have made the most of that favourable circumstance. Her figure had its defects concealed, and its remaining merits set off to advantage. At the same time she evidently held herself above the common deceptions by which some women seek to conceal their age. She wore her own gray hair, and her complexion bore the test of daylight. On entering the room, she made her apologies with some embarrassment. Being the embarrassment of a stranger (and not of a youthful stranger) it failed to impress Mr. Lismore favourably.

I am afraid I have chosen an inconvenient time for my visit, she began.

I am at your service, he answered, a little stiffly, especially if you will be so kind as to mention your business with me in few words.

She was a woman of some spirit, and that reply roused her.

I will mention it in one word, she said, smartly. My business is gratitude.

He was completely at a loss to understand what she meant, and he said so plainly. Instead of explaining herself she put a question.

Do you remember the night of the 11th of March, between five and six years since?

He considered for a moment.

No, he said, I don't remember it. Excuse me Mrs. Callender, I have affairs of my own to attend to which cause me some anxiety −

Let me assist your memory, Mr. Lismore, and I will leave you to your affairs. On the date that I have referred to you were on your way to the railway−station at Bexmore, to catch the night express from the north to London.

As a hint that his time was valuable the ship−owner had hitherto remained standing. He now took his customary seat, and began to listen with some interest. Mrs. Callender had produced her effect on him already.

It was absolutely necessary, she proceeded, that you should be on board your ship in the London docks at nine o'clock the next morning. If you had lost the express the vessel would have sailed without you.

The expression of his face began to change to surprise.

Who told you that? he asked.

You shall hear directly. On your way into the town your carriage was stopped by an obstruction on the highroad. The people of Bexmore were looking at a house on fire.

He started to his feet.

Good heavens! are you the lady?

She held up her hand in satirical protest.

Gently, sir! You suspected me just now of wasting your valuable time. Don't rashly conclude that I am the lady until you find that I am acquainted with the circumstances.

Is there no excuse for my failing to recognise you? Mr. Lismore asked. We were on the dark side of the burning house; you were fainting, and I

And you, she interposed, after saving me at the risk of your own life, turned a deaf ear to my poor husband's entreaties when he asked you to wait till I had recovered my senses.

Your poor husband? Surely, Mrs. Callender, he received no serious injury from the fire?

The firemen rescued him under circumstances of peril, she answered, and at his great age he sank under the shock. I have lost the kindest and best of men. Do you remember how you parted from him burned and bruised in saving me? He liked to talk of it in his last illness. 'At least,' he said to you, 'tell me the name of the man who preserved my wife from a dreadful death.' You threw your card to him out of the carriage window, and away you went at a gallop to catch your train. In all the years that have passed I have kept that card, and have vainly inquired for my brave sea−captain. Yesterday I saw your name on the list of speakers at the Mansion House, Need I say that I attended the meeting? Need I tell you now why I come here and interrupt you in business hours?

She held out her hand. Mr. Lismore took it in silence, and pressed it warmly.

You have not done with me yet, she resumed, with a smile. Do you remember what I said of my errand when I first came in?

You said it was an errand of gratitude.

Something more than the gratitude which only says 'thank you,' she added. Before I explain myself, however, I want to know what you have been doing, and how it was that my inquiries failed to trace you after that terrible night. The appearance of depression which Mrs. Calender had noticed at the public meeting showed itself again in Mr. Lismore's face. He sighed as he answered her.

My story has one merit, he said: it is soon told. I cannot wonder that you failed to discover me. In the first place, I was not captain of my ship at that time; I was only mate. In the second place, I inherited some money, and ceased to lead a sailor's life, in less than a year from the night of the fire. You will now understand what obstacles were in the way of your tracing me. With my little capital I started successfully in business as a ship−owner. At the time I naturally congratulated myself on my own good fortune. We little know, Mrs. Callender, what the future has in store for us.

He stopped. His handsome features hardened, as if he were suffering (and concealing) pain. Before it was possible to speak to him there was a knock at the door. Another visitor without an appointment had called; the clerk appeared again with a card and a message.

The gentleman begs you will see him, sir. He has something to tell you which is too important to be delayed.

Hearing the message, Mrs. Callender rose immediately.

It is enough for to−day that we understand each other, she said. Have you any engagement to−morrow after the hours of business?

None.

She pointed to her card on the writing−table. Will you come to me to−morrow evening at that address? I am like the gentleman who has just called: I too have my reason for wishing to see you.

He gladly accepted the invitation. Mrs. Callender stopped him as he opened the door for her.

Shall I offend you, she said, if I ask a strange question before I go? I have a better motive, mind, than mere curiosity. Are you married?

No.

Forgive me again, she resumed. At my age you cannot possibly misunderstand me; and yet

She hesitated. Mr. Lismore tried to give her confidence. Pray don't stand on ceremony, Mrs. Callender. Nothing that *you* can ask me need be prefaced by an apology.

Thus encouraged, she ventured to proceed. You may be engaged to be married? she suggested. Or you may be in love?

He found it impossible to conceal his surprise, but he answered without hesitation.

There is no such bright prospect in *my* life, he said. I am not even in love.

She left him with a little sigh. It sounded like a sigh of relief.

Ernest Lismore was thoroughly puzzled. What could be the old lady's object in ascertaining that he was still free from a matrimonial engagement? If the idea had occurred to him in time he might have alluded to her domestic life, and might have asked if she had children. With a little tact he might have discovered more than this. She had described her feeling toward him as passing the ordinary limits of gratitude, and she was evidently rich enough to be above the imputation of a mercenary motive. Did she propose to brighten those dreary prospects to which he had alluded in speaking of his own life? When he presented himself at her house the next evening would she introduce him to a charming daughter?

He smiled as the idea occurred to him. An appropriate time to be thinking of my chances of marriage! he said to himself. In another month I may be a ruined man.

The gentleman who had so urgently requested an interview was a devoted friend, who had obtained a means of helping Ernest at a serious crisis in his affairs.

It had been truly reported that he was in a position of pecuniary embarrassment, owing to the failure of a mercantile house with which he had been intimately connected. Whispers affecting his own solvency had followed on the bankruptcy of the firm. He had already endeavoured to obtain advances of money on the usual conditions, and had been met by excuses for delay. His friend had now arrived with a letter of introduction to a capitalist, well known in commercial circles for his daring speculations and for his great wealth.

Looking at the letter, Ernest observed that the envelope was sealed. In spite of that ominous innovation on established usage in cases of personal introduction, he presented the letter. On this occasion he was not put off with excuses. The capitalist flatly declined to discount Mr. Lismore's bills unless they were backed by responsible names.

Ernest made a last effort.

He applied for help to two mercantile men whom he had assisted in *their* difficulties, and whose names would have satisfied the money−lender. They were most sincerely sorry, but they too refused.

The one security that he could offer was open, it must be owned, to serious objections on the score of risk. He wanted an advance of twenty thousand pounds, secured on a homeward−bound ship and cargo. But the vessel was not insured, and at that stormy season she was already more than a month overdue. Could grateful colleagues be blamed if they forgot their obligations when they were asked to offer pecuniary help to a merchant in this situation? Ernest returned to his office without money and without credit.

A man threatened by ruin is in no state of mind to keep an engagement at a lady's tea−table. Ernest sent a letter of apology to Mrs. Callender, alleging extreme pressure of business as the excuse for breaking his engagement.

Am I to wait for an answer, sir? the messenger asked.

No; you are merely to leave the letter.

In an hour's time, to Ernest's astonishment, the messenger returned with a reply.

The lady was just going out, sir, when I rang at the door, he explained, and she took the letter from me herself. She didn't appear to know your handwriting, and she asked me who I came from. When I mentioned your

name I was ordered to wait.

Ernest opened the letter.

DEAR MR. LISMORE: One of us must speak out, and your letter of apology forces me to be that one. If you are really so proud and so distrustful as you seem to be, I shall offend you; if not, I shall prove myself to be your friend.

Your excuse is 'pressure of business'; the truth (as I have good reason to believe) is 'want of money.' I heard a stranger at that public meeting say that you were seriously embarrassed by some failure in the City.

Let me tell you what my own pecuniary position is in two words: I am the childless widow of a rich man

Ernest paused. His anticipated discovery of Mrs. Callender's charming daughter was in his mind for the moment. That little romance must return to the world of dreams, he thought, and went on with the letter.

After what I owe to you, I don't regard it as repaying an obligation; I consider myself as merely performing a duty when I offer to assist you by a loan of money.

Wait a little before you throw my letter into the waste−paper basket.

Circumstances (which it is impossible for me to mention before we meet) put it out of my power to help you unless I attach to my most sincere offer of service a very unusual and very embarrassing condition. If you are on the brink of ruin that misfortune will plead my excuse and your excuse too, if you accept the loan on my terms. In any case, I rely on the sympathy and forbearance of the man to whom I owe my life.

After what I have now written, there is only one thing to add: I beg to decline accepting your excuses, and I shall expect to see you to−morrow evening, as we arranged. I am an obstinate old woman, but I am also your faithful friend and servant,

MARY CALLENDER.

Ernest looked up from the letter. What can this possibly mean? he wondered.

But he was too sensible a man to be content with wondering; he decided on keeping his engagement.

What Dr. Johnson called the insolence of wealth appears far more frequently in the houses of the rich than in the manners of the rich. The reason is plain enough. Personal ostentation is, in the very nature of it, ridiculous; but the ostentation which exhibits magnificent pictures, priceless china, and splendid furniture, can purchase good taste to guide it, and can assert itself without affording the smallest opening for a word of depreciation or a look of contempt. If I am worth a million of money, and if I am dying to show it, I don't ask you to look at me, I ask you to look at my house.

Keeping his engagement with Mrs. Callender, Ernest discovered that riches might be lavishly and yet modestly used.

In crossing the hall and ascending the stairs, look where he might, his notice was insensibly won by proofs of the taste which is not to be purchased, and the wealth which uses, but never exhibits, its purse. Conducted by a man−servant to the landing on the first floor, he found a maid at the door of the boudoir waiting to announce him. Mrs. Callender advanced to welcome her guest, in a simple evening dress, perfectly suited to her age. All that had looked worn and faded in her fine face by daylight was now softly obscured by shaded lamps. Objects of beauty

surrounded her, which glowed with subdued radiance from their background of sober colour. The influence of appearances is the strongest of all outward influences, while it lasts. For the moment the scene produced its impression on Ernest, in spite of the terrible anxieties which consumed him. Mrs. Callender in his office was a woman who had stepped out of her appropriate sphere. Mrs. Callender in her own house was a woman who had risen to a new place in his estimation.

I am afraid you don't thank me for forcing you to keep your engagement, she said, with her friendly tones and her pleasant smile.

Indeed I do thank you, he replied. Your beautiful house and your gracious welcome have persuaded me into forgetting my troubles for a while.

The smile passed away from her face. Then it is true, she said, gravely.

Only too true.

She led him to a seat beside her, and waited to speak again until her maid had brought in the tea.

Have you read my letter in the same friendly spirit in which I wrote it? she asked, when they were alone again.

I have read your letter gratefully, but

But you don't know yet what I have to say. Let us understand each other before we make any objections on either side. Will you tell me what your present position is at its worst? I can, and will, speak plainly when my turn comes, if you will honour me with your confidence. Not if it distresses you, she added, observing him attentively. He was ashamed of his hesitation, and he made amends for it.

Do you thoroughly understand me? he asked, when the whole truth had been laid before her without reserve.

She summed up the result in her own words: If your overdue ship returns safely within a month from this time, you can borrow the money you want without difficulty. If the ship is lost, you have no alternative, when the end of the month comes, but to accept a loan from me or to suspend payment. Is that the hard truth?

It is.

And the sum you require is twenty thousand pounds?

Yes.

I have twenty times as much money as that, Mr. Lismore, at my sole disposal on one condition.

The condition alluded to in your letter?

Yes.

Does the fulfilment of the condition depend in some way on any decision of mine?

It depends entirely on you.

That answer closed his lips.

With a composed manner and a steady hand, she poured herself out a cup of tea. I conceal it from you, she said, but I want confidence Here (she pointed to the cup) is the friend of women, rich or poor, when they are in trouble. What I have now to say obliges me to speak in praise of myself. I don't like it; let me get it over as soon as I can. My husband was very fond of me; he had the most absolute confidence in my discretion, and in my sense of duty to him and to myself. His last words before he died were words that thanked me for making the happiness of his life. As soon as I had in some degree recovered after the affliction that had fallen on me, his lawyer and executor produced a copy of his will, and said there were two clauses in it which my husband had expressed a wish that I should read. It is needless to say that I obeyed. mit to certain restrictions, which, remembering my position, you will understand and excuse.

We are to live together, it is unnecessary to say, as mother and son. The marriage ceremony is to be strictly private, and you are so to arrange our affairs that, immediately afterward, we leave England for any foreign place which you prefer. Some of my friends, and (perhaps) some of your friends, will certainly misinterpret our motives, if we stay in our own country, in a manner which would be unendurable to a woman like me.

As to our future lives, I have the most perfect confidence in you, and I should leave you in the same position of independence which you occupy now. When you wish for my company you will always be welcome. At other times you are your own master. I live on my side of the house, and you live on yours; and I am to be allowed my hours of solitude every day in the pursuit of musical occupations, which have been happily associated with all my past life, and which I trust confidently to your indulgence.

A last word, to remind you of what you may be too kind to think of yourself.

At my age, you cannot, in the course of nature. be troubled by the society of a grateful old woman for many years. You are young enough to look forward to another marriage, which shall be something more than a mere form. Even if you meet with the happy woman in my lifetime, honestly tell me of it, and I promise to tell her that she has only to wait.

In the meantime, don't think, because I write composedly, that I write heartlessly. You pleased and interested me when I first saw you at the public meeting. I don't think I could have proposed what you call this sacrifice of myself to a man who had personally repelled me, though I have felt my debt of gratitude as sincerely as ever. Whether your ship is safe or whether your ship is lost, old Mary Callender likes you, and owns it without false shame.

Let me have your answer this evening, either personally or by letter, whichever you like best.

Mrs. Callender received a written answer long before the evening. It said much in few words:

A man impenetrable to kindness might be able to resist your letter. I am not that man. Your great heart has conquered me.

The few formalities which precede marriage by special license were observed by Ernest. While the destiny of their future lives was still in suspense, an unacknowledged feeling of embarrassment on either side kept Ernest and Mrs. Callender apart. Every day brought the lady her report of the state of affairs in the City, written always in the same words: No news of the ship.

On the day before the ship−owner's liabilities became due the terms of the report from the City remained unchanged, and the special license was put to its contemplated use. Mrs. Callender's lawyer and Mrs. Callender's maid were the only persons trusted with the secret. Leaving the chief clerk in charge of the business, with every pecuniary demand on his employer satisfied in full, the strangely married pair quitted England.

They arranged to wait for a few days in Paris, to receive any letters of importance which might have been addressed to Ernest in the interval. On the evening of their arrival a telegram from London was waiting at their hotel. It announced that the missing ship had passed up channel undiscovered in a fog until she reached the Downs on the day before Ernest's liabilities fell due.

Do you regret it? Mrs. Lismore said to her husband.

Not for a moment! he answered.

They decided on pursuing their journey as far as Munich.

Mrs. Lismore's taste for music was matched by Ernest's taste for painting. In his leisure hours he cultivated the art, and delighted in it. The picture−galleries of Munich were almost the only galleries in Europe which he had not seen. True to the engagements to which she had pledged herself, his wife was willing to go wherever it might please him to take her. The one suggestion she made was that they should hire furnished apartments. If they lived at a hotel friends of the husband or the wife (visitors like themselves to the famous city) might see their names in the book or might meet them at the door.

They were soon established in a house large enough to provide them with every accommodation which they required. Ernest's days were passed in the galleries, Mrs. Lismore remaining at home, devoted to her music, until it was time to go out with her husband for a drive. Living together in perfect amity and concord, they were nevertheless not living happily. Without any visible reason for the change, Mrs. Lismore's spirits were depressed. On the one occasion when Ernest noticed it she made an effort to be cheerful, which it distressed him to see. He allowed her to think that she had relieved him of any further anxiety. Whatever doubts he might feel were doubts delicately concealed from that time forth.

But when two people are living together in a state of artificial tranquillity, it seems to be a law of nature that the element of disturbance gathers unseen, and that the outburst comes inevitably with the lapse of time.

In ten days from the date of their arrival at Munich the crisis came. Ernest returned later than usual from the picture−gallery, and, for the first time in his wife's experience, shut himself up in his own room.

He appeared at the dinner hour with a futile excuse. Mrs. Lismore waited until the servant had withdrawn.

Now, Ernest, she said, it's time to tell me the truth.

Her manner, when she said those few words, took him by surprise. She was unquestionably confused, and, instead of looking at him, she trifled with the fruit on her plate. Embarrassed on his side, he could only answer:

I have nothing to tell.

Were there many visitors at the gallery? she asked.

About the same as usual.

Any that you particularly noticed? she went on. I mean among the ladies.

He laughed uneasily.

You forget how interested I am in the pictures, he said.

There was a pause. She looked up at him, and suddenly looked away again; but he saw it plainly there were tears in her eyes.

Do you mind turning down the gas? she said. My eyes have been weak all day.

He complied with her request the more readily, having his own reasons for being glad to escape the glaring scrutiny of the light.

I think I will rest a little on the sofa, she resumed. In the position which he occupied his back would have been now turned on her. She stopped him when he tried to move his chair. I would rather not look at you, Ernest, she said, when you have lost confidence in me.

Not the words, but the tone, touched all that was generous and noble in his nature. He left his place and knelt beside her, and opened to her his whole heart.

Am I not unworthy of you? he asked, when it was over.

She pressed his hand in silence.

I should be the most ungrateful wretch living, he said, if I did not think of you, and you only, now that my confession is made. We will leave Munich to−morrow, and, if resolution can help me, I will only remember the sweetest woman my eyes ever looked on as the creature of a dream.

She hid her face on his breast, and reminded him of that letter of her writing which had decided the course of their lives.

When I thought you might meet the happy woman in my lifetime I said to you, 'Tell me of it, and I promise to tell her that she has only to wait.' Time must pass, Ernest, before it can be needful to perform my promise, but you might let me see her. If you find her in the gallery to−morrow you might bring her here.

Mrs. Lismore's request met with no refusal. Ernest was only at a loss to know how to grant it.

You tell me she is a copyist of pictures, his wife reminded him. She will be interested in hearing of the portfolio of drawings by the great French artists which I bought for you in Paris. Ask her to come and see them, and to tell you if she can make some copies; and say, if you like, that I shall be glad to become acquainted with her.

He felt her breath beating fast on his bosom. In the fear that she might lose all control over herself, he tried to relieve her by speaking lightly.

What an invention yours is! he said. If my wife ever tries to deceive me, I shall be a mere child in her hands.

She rose abruptly from the sofa, kissed him on the forehead, and said wildly, I shall be better in bed! Before he could move or speak she had left him.

The next morning he knocked at the door of his wife's room, and asked how she had passed the night.

I have slept badly, she answered, and I must beg you to excuse my absence at breakfast−time. She called him back as he was about to withdraw. Remember, she said, when you return from the gallery to−day I expect that you will not return alone.

Three hours later he was at home again. The young lady's services as a copyist were at his disposal; she had returned with him to look at the drawings.

The sitting−room was empty when they entered it. He rang for his wife's maid, and was informed that Mrs. Lismore had gone out. Refusing to believe the woman, he went to his wife's apartments. She was not to be found.

When he returned to the sitting−room the young lady was not unnaturally offended. He could make allowances for her being a little out of temper at the slight that had been put on her; but he was inexpressibly disconcerted by the manner almost the coarse manner in which she expressed herself.

I have been talking to your wife's maid while you have been away, she said. I find you have married an old lady for her money. She is jealous of me, of course?

Let me beg you to alter your opinion, he answered. You are wronging my wife; she is incapable of any such feeling as you attribute to her.

The young lady laughed. At any rate, you are a good husband, she said, satirically. Suppose you own the truth: wouldn't you like her better if she was young and pretty like me ?

He was not merely surprised, he was disgusted. Her beauty had so completely fascinated him when he first saw her that the idea of associating any want of refinement and good breeding with such a charming creature never entered his mind. The disenchantment to him was already so complete that he was even disagreeably affected by the tone of her voice; it was almost as repellent to him as thie exhibition of unrestrained bad temper which she seemed perfectly careless to conceal.

I confess you surprise me, he said, coldly.

The reply produced no effect on her. On the contrary, she became more insolent than ever.

I have a fertile fancy, she went on, and your absurd way of taking a joke only encourages me! Suppose you could transform this sour old wife of yours, who has insulted me, into the sweetest young creature that ever lived by only holding up your finger, wouldn't you do it?

This passed the limits of his endurance. I have no wish, he said, to forget the consideration which is due to a woman. You leave me but one alternative. He rose to go out of the room.

She ran to the door as he spoke, and placed herself in the way of his going out.

He signed to her to let him pass.

She suddenly threw her arms round his neck, kissed him passionately, and whispered, with her lips at his ear, O Ernest, forgive me! Could I have asked you to marry me for my money if I had not taken refuge in a disguise?

When he had sufficiently recovered to think he put her back from him. Is there an end of the deception now? he asked, sternly. Am I to trust you in your new character?

You are not to be harder on me than I deserve, she answered, gently. Did you ever hear of an actress named Miss Max?

He began to understand her. Forgive me if I spoke harshly, he said. You have put me to a severe trial.

She burst into tears. Love, she murmured. is my only excuse.

From that moment she had won her pardon. He took her hand and made her sit by him.

Yes, he said, I have heard of Miss Max, and of her wonderful powers of personation; and I have always regretted not having seen her while she was on the stage.

Did you hear anything more of her, Ernest?

Yes; I heard that she was a pattern of modesty and good conduct, and that she gave up her profession at the height of her success to marry an old man.

Will you come with me to my room? she asked. I have something there which I wish to show you.

It was the copy of her husband's will.

Read the lines, Ernest, which begin at the top of the page. Let my dead husband speak for me.

The lines ran thus:

My motive in marrying Miss Max must be stated in this place, in justice to her, and, I will venture to add, in justice to myself. I felt the sincerest sympathy for her position. She was without father, mother, or friends, one of the poor forsaken children whom the mercy of the foundling hospital provides with a home. Her after life on the stage was the life of a virtuous woman, persecuted by profligates, insulted by some of the baser creatures associated with her, to whom she was an object of envy. I offered her a home and the protection of a father, on the only terms which the world would recognise as worthy of us. My experience of her since our marriage has been the experience of unvarying goodness, sweetness, and sound sense. She has behaved so nobly in a trying position that I wish her (even in this life) to have her reward. I entreat her to make a second choice in marriage, which shall not be a mere form. I firmly believe that she will choose well and wisely, that she will make the happiness of a man who is worthy of her, and that, as wife and mother, she will set an example of inestimable value in the social sphere that she occupies. In proof of the heartfelt sincerity with which I pay my tribute to her virtues, I add to this, my will, the clause that follows.

With the clause that followed Ernest was already acquainted.

Will you now believe that I never loved till I saw your face for the first time? said his wife. I had no experience to place me on my guard against the fascination the madness, some people might call it which possesses a woman when all her heart is given to a man. Don't despise me, my dear! Remember that I had to save you from disgrace and ruin. Besides, my old stage remembrances tempted me. I had acted in a play in which the heroine did what I have done. It didn't end with me as it did with her in the story. *She* was represented as rejoicing in the success of her disguise. I have known some miserable hours of doubt and shame since our marriage. When I went to meet you in my own person at the picture−gallery, oh, what relief, what joy I felt when I saw how you admired me! It was not because I could no longer carry on the disguise; I was able to get hours of rest from the effort, not only at night, but in the daytime, when I was shut up in my retirement in the music−room, and when my maid kept watch against discovery. No, my love! I hurried on the disclosure because I could no longer endure the hateful triumph of my own deception. Ah, look at that witness against me! I can't bear even to see it.

She abruptly left him. The drawer that she had opened to take out the copy of the will also contained the false gray hair which she had discarded. It had only that moment attracted her notice. She snatched it up and turned to the fireplace.

Ernest took it from her before she could destroy it. Give it to me, he said.

Why?

He drew her gently to his bosom, and answered, I must not forget my old wife.