

Mrs. Zant and the Ghost

By Wilkie Collins

1

The course of this narrative describes the return of a disembodied spirit to earth, and leads the reader on new and strange ground.

Not in the obscurity of midnight, but in the searching light of day, did the supernatural influence assert itself. Neither revealed by a vision, nor announced by a voice, it reached mortal knowledge through the sense which is least easily self-deceived: the sense that feels.

The record of this event will of necessity produce conflicting impressions. It will raise, in some minds, the doubt which reason asserts; it will invigorate, in other minds, the hope which faith justifies; and it will leave the terrible question of the destinies of man, where centuries of vain investigation have left it—in the dark.

Having only undertaken in the present narrative to lead the way along a succession of events, the writer declines to follow modern examples by thrusting himself and his opinions on the public view. He returns to the shadow from which he has emerged, and leaves the opposing forces of incredulity and belief to fight the old battle over again, on the old ground.

2

The events happened soon after the first thirty years of the present century had come to an end.

On a fine morning, early in the month of April, a gentleman of middle age (named Rayburn) took his little daughter Lucy out for a walk, in the woodland pleasure-ground of Western London, called Kensington Gardens.

The few friends whom he possessed reported of Mr. Rayburn (not unkindly) that he was a reserved and solitary man. He might have been more accurately described as a widower devoted to his only surviving child. Although he was not more than forty years of age, the one pleasure which made life enjoyable to Lucy's father was offered by Lucy herself.

Playing with her ball, the child ran on to the southern limit of the Gardens, at that part of it which still remains nearest to the old Palace of Kensington. Observing close at hand one of those spacious covered seats, called in England "alcoves," Mr. Rayburn was reminded that he had the morning's newspaper in his pocket, and that he might do well to rest and read. At that early hour, the place was a solitude.

"Go on playing, my dear," he said; "but take care to keep where I can see you."

Lucy tossed up her ball; and Lucy's father opened his newspaper. He had not been reading for more than ten minutes, when he felt a familiar little hand laid on his knee.

"Tired of playing?" he inquired—with his eyes still on the newspaper.

"I'm frightened, papa."

He looked up directly. The child's pale face startled him. He took her on his knee and kissed her.

"You oughtn't to be frightened, Lucy, when I am with you," he said gently. "What is it?" He looked out of the alcove as he spoke, and saw a little dog among the trees. "Is it the dog?" he asked.

Lucy answered:

“It’s not the dog—it’s the lady.”

The lady was not visible from the alcove.

“Has she said anything to you?” Mr. Rayburn inquired.

“No.”

“What has she done to frighten you?”

The child put her arms round her father’s neck.

“Whisper, papa,” she said; “I’m afraid of her hearing us. I think she’s mad.”

“Why do you think so, Lucy?”

“She came near to me. I thought she was going to say something.

She seemed to be ill.”

“Well? And what then?”

“She looked at me.”

There, Lucy found herself at a loss how to express what she had to say next—and took refuge in silence.

“Nothing very wonderful, so far,” her father suggested.

“Yes, papa—but she didn’t seem to see me when she looked.”

“Well, and what happened then?”

“The lady was frightened—and that frightened me. I think,” the child repeated positively, “she’s mad.”

It occurred to Mr. Rayburn that the lady might be blind. He rose at once to set the doubt at rest.

“Wait here,” he said, “and I’ll come back to you.”

But Lucy clung to him with both hands; Lucy declared that she was afraid to be by herself. They left the alcove together.

The new point of view at once revealed the stranger, leaning against the trunk of a tree. She was dressed in the deep mourning of a widow. The pallor of her face, the glassy stare in her eyes, more than accounted for the child’s terror—it excused the alarming conclusion at which she had arrived.

“Go nearer to her,” Lucy whispered.

They advanced a few steps. It was now easy to see that the lady was young, and wasted by illness—but (arriving at a doubtful conclusion perhaps under present circumstances) apparently possessed of rare personal attractions in happier days. As the father and daughter advanced a little, she discovered them. After some hesitation, she left the tree; approached with an evident intention of speaking; and suddenly paused. A change to astonishment and fear animated her vacant eyes. If it had not been plain before, it was now beyond all doubt that she was not a poor blind creature, deserted and helpless. At the same time, the expression of her face was not easy to understand. She could hardly have looked more amazed and bewildered, if the two strangers who were observing her had suddenly vanished from the place in which they stood.

Mr. Rayburn spoke to her with the utmost kindness of voice and manner.

“I am afraid you are not well,” he said. “Is there anything that I can do—”

The next words were suspended on his lips. It was impossible to realize such a state of things; but the strange impression that she had already produced on him was now confirmed. If he could believe his senses, her face did certainly tell him that he was invisible and inaudible to the woman whom he had just addressed! She moved slowly away with a heavy sigh, like a person disappointed and distressed. Following her with his eyes, he saw the dog once more—a little smooth-coated terrier of the ordinary English breed. The dog showed none of the restless activity

of his race. With his head down and his tail depressed, he crouched like a creature paralysed by fear. His mistress roused him by a call. He followed her listlessly as she turned away.

After walking a few paces only, she suddenly stood still.

Mr. Rayburn heard her talking to herself.

“Did I feel it again?” she said, as if perplexed by some doubt that awed or grieved her. After a while, her arms rose slowly, and opened with a gentle caressing action—an embrace strangely offered to the empty air! “No,” she said to herself sadly, after waiting a moment. “More perhaps when to-morrow comes—no more to-day.” She looked up at the clear blue sky. “The beautiful sunlight! the merciful sunlight!” she murmured. “I should have died if it had happened in the dark.”

Once more she called to the dog; and once more she walked slowly away.

“Is she going home, papa?” the child asked.

“We will try and find out,” the father answered.

He was by this time convinced that the poor creature was in no condition to be permitted to go out without someone to take care of her. From motives of humanity, he was resolved on making the attempt to communicate with her friends.

3

The lady left the Gardens by the nearest gate; stopping to lower her veil before she turned into the busy thoroughfare which leads to Kensington. Advancing a little way along the High Street, she entered a house of respectable appearance, with a card in one of the windows which announced that apartments were to let.

Mr. Rayburn waited a minute—then knocked at the door, and asked if he could see the mistress of the house. The servant showed him into a room on the ground floor, neatly but scantily furnished. One little white object varied the grim brown monotony of the empty table. It was a visiting-card.

With a child’s unceremonious curiosity Lucy pounced on the card, and spelt the name, letter by letter:

“Z.A.N.T” she repeated. “What does that mean?”

Her father looked at the card, as he took it away from her, and put it back on the table. The name was printed, and the address was added in pencil: “Mr. John Zant, Purley’s Hotel.”

The mistress made her appearance. Mr. Rayburn heartily wished himself out of the house again, the moment he saw her. The ways in which it is possible to cultivate the social virtues are more numerous and more varied than is generally supposed. This lady’s way had apparently accustomed her to meet her fellow-creatures on the hard ground of justice without mercy. Something in her eyes, when she looked at Lucy, said:

“I wonder whether that child gets punished when she deserves it?”

“Do you wish to see the rooms which I have to let?” she began.

Mr. Rayburn at once stated the object of his visit—as clearly, as civilly, and as concisely as a man could do it. He was conscious (he added) that he had been guilty perhaps of an act of intrusion.

The manner of the mistress of the house showed that she entirely agreed with him. He suggested, however, that his motive might excuse him. The mistress’s manner changed, and asserted a difference of opinion.

“I only know the lady whom you mention,” she said, “as a person of the highest respectability, in delicate health. She has taken my first-floor apartments, with excellent references; and she gives remarkably little trouble. I have no claim to interfere with her proceedings, and no reason to doubt that she is capable of taking care of herself.”

Mr. Rayburn unwisely attempted to say a word in his own defence.

“Allow me to remind you—” he began.

“Of what, sir?”

“Of what I observed, when I happened to see the lady in Kensington Gardens.”

“I am not responsible for what you observed in Kensington Gardens. If your time is of any value, pray don’t let me detain you.”

Dismissed in those terms, Mr. Rayburn took Lucy’s hand and withdrew. He had just reached the door, when it was opened from the outer side. The Lady of Kensington Gardens stood before him. In the position which he and his daughter now occupied, their backs were towards the window. Would she remember having seen them for a moment in the Gardens?

“Excuse me for intruding on you,” she said to the landlady. “Your servant tells me my brother-in-law called while I was out. He sometimes leaves a message on his card.”

She looked for the message, and appeared to be disappointed: there was no writing on the card.

Mr. Rayburn lingered a little in the doorway, on the chance of hearing something more. The landlady’s vigilant eyes discovered him.

“Do you know this gentleman?” she said maliciously to her lodger.

“Not that I remember.”

Replying in those words, the lady looked at Mr. Rayburn for the first time; and suddenly drew back from him.

“Yes,” she said, correcting herself; “I think we met

Her embarrassment overpowered her; she could say no more.

Mr. Rayburn compassionately finished the sentence for her.

“We met accidentally in Kensington Gardens,” he said.

She seemed to be incapable of appreciating the kindness of his motive. After hesitating a little she addressed a proposal to him, which seemed to show distrust of the landlady.

“Will you let me speak to you upstairs in my own rooms?” she asked.

Without waiting for a reply, she led the way to the stairs. Mr. Rayburn and Lucy followed. They were just beginning the ascent to the first floor, when the spiteful landlady left the lower room, and called to her lodger over their heads:

“Take care what you say to this man, Mrs. Zant! He thinks you’re mad.”

Mrs. Zant turned round on the landing, and looked at him. Not a word fell from her lips. She suffered, she feared, in silence. Something in the sad submission of her face touched the springs of innocent pity in Lucy’s heart. The child burst out crying.

That artless expression of sympathy drew Mrs. Zant down the few stairs which separated her from Lucy.

“May I kiss your dear little girl?” she said to Mr. Rayburn. The landlady, standing on the mat below, expressed her opinion of the value of caresses, as compared with a sounder method of treating young persons in tears: “If that child was mine,” she remarked, “I would give her something to cry for.”

In the meantime, Mrs. Zant led the way to her rooms.

The first words she spoke showed that the landlady had succeeded but too well in prejudicing her against Mr. Rayburn.

“Will you let me ask your child,” she said to him, “why you think me mad?”

He met this strange request with a firm answer.

“You don’t know yet what I really do think. Will you give me a minute’s attention?”

“No,” she said positively. “The child pities me, I want to speak to the child. What did you see me do in the Gardens, my dear, that surprised you?” Lucy turned uneasily to her father; Mrs. Zant persisted. “I first saw you by yourself, and then I saw you with your father,” she went on. “When I came nearer to you, did I look very oddly—as if I didn’t see you at all?”

Lucy hesitated again; and Mr. Rayburn interfered.

“You are confusing my little girl,” he said. “Allow me to answer your questions—or excuse me if I leave you.”

There was something in his look, or in his tone, that mastered her. She put her hand to her head.

“I don’t think I’m fit for it,” she answered vacantly. “My courage has been sorely tried already. If I can get a little rest and sleep, you may find me a different person. I am left a great deal by myself; and I have reasons for trying to compose my mind. Can I see you to-morrow? Or write to you? Where do you live?”

Mr. Rayburn laid his card on the table in silence. She had strongly excited his interest. He honestly desired to be of some service to this forlorn creature—abandoned so cruelly, as it seemed to her own guidance. But he had no authority to exercise, no sort of claim to direct her actions, even if she consented to accept his advice. As a last resource he ventured on an allusion to the relative of whom she had spoken downstairs.

“When do you expect to see your brother-in-law again?” he said.

“I don’t know,” she answered. “I should like to see him—he is so kind to me.”

She turned aside to take leave of Lucy.

“Good-bye, my little friend. If you live to grow up, I hope you will never be such a miserable woman as I am.” She suddenly looked round at Mr. Rayburn. “Have you got a wife at home?” she asked.

“My wife is dead.”

“And *you* have a child to comfort you! Please leave me; you harden my heart. Oh, sir, don’t you understand? You make me envy you!”

Mr. Rayburn was silent when he and his daughter were out in the street again. Lucy, as became a dutiful child, was silent, too. But there are limits to human endurance—and Lucy’s capacity for self-control gave way at last.

“Are you thinking of the lady, papa?” she said.

He only answered by nodding his head. His daughter had interrupted him at that critical moment in a man’s reflections, when he is on the point of making up his mind. Before they were at home again Mr Rayburn had arrived at a decision. Mrs. Zant’s brother-in-law was evidently ignorant of any serious necessity for his interference—or he would have made arrangements for immediately repeating his visit. In this state of things, if any evil happened to Mrs. Zant, silence on Mr. Rayburn’s part might be indirectly to blame for a serious misfortune. Arriving at that conclusion, he decided upon running the risk of being rudely received, for the second time, by another stranger.

Leaving Lucy under the care of her governess, he went at once to the address that had been written on the visiting-card left at the lodging-house, and sent in his name. A courteous message was returned. Mr. John Zant was at home, and would be happy to see him.

Mr. Rayburn was shown into one of the private sitting-rooms of the hotel.

He observed that the customary position of the furniture in a room had been, in some respects altered. An armchair, a side-table, and a footstool had all been removed to one of the windows, and had been placed as close as possible to the light. On the table lay a large open roll of morocco leather, containing rows of elegant little instruments in steel and ivory. Waiting by the table, stood Mr. John Zant. He said "Good-morning" in a bass voice, so profound and so melodious that those two commonplace words assumed a new importance, coming from his lips. His personal appearance was in harmony with his magnificent voice—he was a tall finely-made man of dark complexion; with big brilliant black eyes, and a noble curling beard, which hid the whole lower part of his face. Having bowed with a happy mingling of dignity and politeness, the conventional side of this gentleman's character suddenly vanished; and a crazy side, to all appearance, took its place. He dropped on his knees in front of the footstool. Had he forgotten to say his prayers that morning, and was he in such a hurry to remedy the fault that he had no time to spare for consulting appearances? The doubt had hardly suggested itself, before it was set at rest in a most unexpected manner. Mr. Zant looked at his visitor with a bland smile, and said:

"Please let me see your feet."

For the moment, Mr. Rayburn lost his presence of mind. He looked at the instruments on the side-table.

"Are you a corn-cutter?" was all he could say.

"Excuse me, sir," returned the polite operator, "the term you use is quite obsolete in our profession." He rose from his knees, and added modestly: "I am a Chiropodist."

"I beg your pardon."

"Don't mention it! You are not, I imagine, in want of my professional services. To what motive may I attribute the honour of your visit?"

By this time Mr. Rayburn had recovered himself.

"I have come here," he answered, "under circumstances which require apology as well as explanation."

Mr. Zant's highly polished manner betrayed signs of alarm; his suspicions pointed to a formidable conclusion—a conclusion that shook him to the innermost recesses of the pocket in which he kept his money.

"The numerous demands on me—" he began.

Mr. Rayburn smiled.

"Make your mind easy," he replied. "I don't want money. My object is to speak with you on the subject of a lady who is a relation of yours."

"My sister-in-law!" Mr. Zant exclaimed. "Pray, take a seat."

Doubting if he had chosen a convenient time for his visit, Mr. Rayburn hesitated.

"Am I likely to be in the way of persons who wish to consult you?" he asked.

"Certainly not. My morning hours of attendance on my clients are from eleven to one." The clock on the mantelpiece struck the quarter-past one as he spoke. "I hope you don't bring me bad news?" he said, very earnestly. "When I called on Mrs. Zant this morning, I heard that she had gone out for a walk. Is it indiscreet to ask how you became acquainted with her?"

Mr. Rayburn at once mentioned what he had seen and heard in Kensington Gardens; not forgetting to add a few words, which described his interview afterwards with Mrs. Zant.

The lady's brother-in-law listened with an interest and sympathy, which offered the strongest possible contrast to the unprovoked rudeness of the mistress of the lodging-house. He declared that he could only do justice to his sense of obligation by following Mr. Rayburn's example, and expressing himself as frankly as if he had been speaking to an old friend.

"The sad story of my sister-in-law's life," he said, "will I think, explain certain things which must have naturally perplexed you. My brother was introduced to her at the house of an Australian gentleman, on a visit to England. She was then employed as governess to his daughters. So sincere was the regard felt for her by the family that the parents had, at the entreaty of their children, asked her to accompany them when they returned to the Colony. The governess thankfully accepted the proposal."

"Had she no relations in England?" Mr. Rayburn asked.

"She was literally alone in the world, sir. When I tell you that she had been brought up in the Foundling Hospital, you will understand what I mean. Oh, there is no romance in my sister-in-law's story! She never has known, or will know, who her parents were or why they deserted her. The happiest moment in her life was the moment when she and my brother first met. It was an instance, on both sides, of love at first sight. Though not a rich man, my brother had earned a sufficient income in mercantile pursuits. His character spoke for itself. In a word, he altered all the poor girl's prospects, as we then hoped and believed, for the better. Her employers deferred their return to Australia, so that she might be married from their house. After a happy life of a few weeks only

His voice failed him; he paused, and turned his face from the light.

"Pardon me," he said; "I am not able, even yet, to speak composedly of my brother's death. Let me only say that the poor young wife was a widow, before the happy days of the honeymoon were over. That dreadful calamity struck her down. Before my brother had been committed to the grave, her life was in danger from brain-fever."

Those words placed in a new light Mr. Rayburn's first fear that her intellect might be deranged. Looking at him attentively, Mr. Zant seemed to understand what was passing in the mind of his guest.

"No!" he said. "If the opinions of the medical men are to be trusted, the result of the illness is injury to her physical strength—not injury to her mind. I have observed in her, no doubt, a certain waywardness of temper since her illness; but that is a trifle. As an example of what I mean, I may tell you that I invited her, on her recovery, to pay me a visit. My house is not in London—the air doesn't agree with me—my place of residence is at St. Sallins-on-Sea. I am not myself a married man; but my excellent housekeeper would have received Mrs. Zant with the utmost kindness. She was resolved—obstinately resolved, poor thing—to remain in London. It is needless to say that, in her melancholy position, I am attentive to her slightest wishes. I took a lodging for her; and, at her special request, I chose a house which was near Kensington Gardens."

"Is there any association with the Gardens which led Mrs. Zant to make that request?"

"Some association, I believe, with the memory of her husband. By the way, I wish to be sure of finding her at home, when I call tomorrow. Did you say (in the course of your interesting statement) that she intended—as you supposed—to return to Kensington Gardens tomorrow? Or has my memory deceived me?"

"Your memory is perfectly accurate."

“Thank you. I confess I am not only distressed by what you have told me of Mrs. Zant—I am at a loss to know how to act for the best. My only idea, at present, is to try change of air and scene. What do you think yourself?”

“I think you are right.”

Mr. Zant still hesitated.

“It would not be easy for me, just now, he said, “to leave my patients and take her abroad.”

The obvious reply to this occurred to Mr. Rayburn. A man of larger worldly experience might have felt certain suspicions, and might have remained silent. Mr. Rayburn spoke.

“Why not renew your invitation and take her to your house at the seaside?” he said.

In the perplexed state of Mr. Zant’s mind, this plain course of action had apparently failed to present itself. His gloomy face brightened directly.

“The very thing!” he said. “I will certainly take your advice. If the air of St. Sallins does nothing else, it will improve her health, and help her to recover her good looks. Did she strike you as having been (in happier days) a pretty woman?”

This was a strangely familiar question to ask—almost an indelicate question, under the circumstances. A certain furtive expression in Mr. Zant’s fine dark eyes seemed to imply that it had been put with a purpose. Was it possible that he suspected Mr. Rayburn’s interest in his sister-in-law to be inspired by any motive which was not perfectly unselfish and perfectly pure? To arrive at such a conclusion as this, might be to judge hastily and cruelly of a man who was perhaps only guilty of a want of delicacy of feeling. Mr. Rayburn honestly did his best to assume the charitable point of view. At the same time, it is not to be denied that his words, when he answered, were carefully guarded, and that he rose to take his leave.

Mr. John Zant hospitably protested.

“Why are you in such a hurry? Must you really go? I shall have the honour of returning your visit to-morrow, when I have made arrangements to profit by that excellent suggestion of yours. Good-bye. God bless you.”

He held out his hand: a hand with a smooth surface and a tawny colour, that fervently squeezed the fingers of a departing friend.

“Is that man a scoundrel?” was Mr. Rayburn’s first thought, after he had left the hotel. His moral sense set all hesitation at rest—and answered: “You’re a fool if you doubt it.”

5

Disturbed by presentiments, Mr. Rayburn returned to his house on foot, by way of trying what exercise would do towards composing his mind.

The experiment failed. He went upstairs and played with Lucy; he drank an extra glass of wine at dinner; he took the child and her governess to a circus in the evening; he ate a little supper, fortified by another glass of wine, before he went to bed—and still those vague forebodings of evil persisted in torturing him. Looking back through his past life, he asked himself if any woman (his late wife of course excepted!) had ever taken the predominant place in his thoughts which Mrs. Zant had assumed—without any discernible reason to account for it? If he had ventured to answer his own question, the reply would have been: Never!

All the next day he waited at home, in expectation of Mr. John Zant’s promised visit, and waited in vain.

Towards evening the parlour-maid appeared at the family tea-table, and presented to her master an unusually large envelope sealed with black wax, and addressed in a strange handwriting. The absence of stamp and postmark showed that it had been left at the house by a messenger.

“Who brought this?” Mr. Rayburn asked.

“A lady, sir—in deep mourning.”

“Did she leave any message?”

“No, sir.”

Having drawn the inevitable conclusion, Mr. Rayburn shut himself up in his library. He was afraid of Lucy’s curiosity and Lucy’s questions, if he read Mrs. Zant’s letter in his daughter’s presence.

Looking at the open envelope after he had taken out the leaves of writing which it contained, he noticed these lines traced inside the cover:

My one excuse for troubling you, when I might have consulted my brother-in-law, will be found in the pages which I enclose. To speak plainly, you have been led to fear that I am not in my right senses. For this very reason, I now appeal to you. Your dreadful doubt of me, sir, is my doubt too. Read what I have written about myself—and then tell me, I entreat you, which I am: A person who has been the object of a supernatural revelation? or an unfortunate creature who is only fit for imprisonment in a mad-house?

Mr. Rayburn opened the manuscript. With steady attention, which soon quickened to breathless interest, he read what follows:

6

THE LADY’S MANUSCRIPT

Yesterday morning, the sun shone in a clear blue sky—after a succession of cloudy days, counting from the first of the month.

The radiant light had its animating effect on my poor spirits. I had passed the night more peacefully than usual; undisturbed by the dream, so cruelly familiar to me, that my lost husband is still living—the dream from which I always wake in tears. Never, since the dark days of my sorrow, have I been so little troubled by the self-tormenting fancies and fears which beset miserable women, as when I left the house, and turned my steps towards Kensington Gardens—for the first time since my husband’s death.

Attended by my only companion, the little dog who had been his favourite as well as mine, I went to the quiet corner of the Gardens which is nearest to Kensington.

On that soft grass, under the shade of those grand trees, we had loitered together in the days of our betrothal. It was his favourite walk; and he had taken me to see it in the early days of our acquaintance. There, he had first asked me to be his wife. There, we had felt the rapture of our first kiss. It was surely natural that I should wish to see once more a place sacred to such memories as these? I am only twenty-three years old; I have no child to comfort me, no companion of my own age, nothing to love but the dumb creature who is so faithfully fond of me.

I went to the tree under which we stood, when my dear one’s eyes told his love before he could utter it in words. The sun of that vanished day shone on me again; it was the

same noontide hour; the same solitude was round me. I had feared the first effect of the dreadful contrast between past and present. No! I was quiet and resigned. My thoughts, rising higher than earth, dwelt on the better life beyond the grave. Some tears came into my eyes. But I was not unhappy. My memory of all that happened may be trusted, even in trifles which relate only to myself—I was not unhappy.

The first object that I saw, when my eyes were clear again, was the dog. He crouched a few paces away from me, trembling pitiably, but uttering no cry. What had caused the fear that overpowered him?

I was soon to know.

I called to the dog; he remained immovable—conscious of some mysterious coming thing that held him spellbound. I tried to go to the poor creature, and fondle and comfort him.

At the first step forward that I took, something stopped me.

It was not to be seen, and not to be heard. It stopped me.

The still figure of the dog disappeared from my view: the lonely scene round me disappeared—excepting the light from heaven, the tree that sheltered me, and the grass in front of me. A sense of unutterable expectation kept my eyes riveted on the grass. Suddenly, I saw its myriad blades rise erect and shivering. The fear came to me of something passing over them with the invisible swiftness of the wind. The shivering advanced. It was all round me. It crept into the leaves of the tree over my head; they shuddered, without a sound to tell of their agitation: their pleasant natural rustling was struck dumb. The songs of the birds had ceased. The cries of the water-fowl on the pond were heard no more. There was a dreadful silence.

But the lovely sunshine poured down on me, as brightly as ever.

In that dazzling light, in that fearful silence, I felt an Invisible Presence near me.

It touched me gently.

At the touch, my heart throbbed with an overwhelming joy. Exquisite pleasure thrilled through every nerve in my body. I knew him! From the unseen world—himself unseen—he had returned to me. Oh, I knew him!

And yet, my helpless mortality longed for a sign that might give me assurance of the truth. The yearning in me shaped itself into words. I tried to utter the words. I would have said, if I could have spoken: “Oh, my angel, give me a token that it is You!” But I was like a person struck dumb—I could only think it.

The Invisible Presence read my thought. I felt my lips touched, as my husband’s lips used to touch them when he kissed me. And that was my answer. A thought came to me again. I would have said, if I could have spoken: “Are you here to take me to the better world?”

I waited. Nothing that I could feel touched me.

I was conscious of thinking once more. I would have said, if I could have spoken: “Are you here to protect me?”

I felt myself held in a gentle embrace, as my husband’s arms used to hold me when he pressed me to his breast. And that was my answer.

The touch that was like the touch of his lips, lingered and was lost; the clasp that was like the clasp of his arms, pressed me and fell away. The garden-scene resumed its natural aspect. I saw a human creature near, a lovely little girl looking at me.

At that moment, when I was my own lonely self again, the sight of the child soothed and attracted me. I advanced, intending to speak to her. To my horror I suddenly ceased to see her. She disappeared as if I had been stricken blind.

And yet I could see the landscape round me; I could see the heaven above me. A time passed—only a few minutes, as I thought—and the child became visible to me again; walking hand-in-hand with her father. I approached them; I was close enough to see that they were looking at me with pity and surprise. My impulse was to ask if they saw anything strange in my face or my manner. Before I could speak, the horrible wonder happened again. They vanished from my view.

Was the Invisible Presence still near? Was it passing between me and my fellow-mortals; forbidding communication, in that place and at that time?

It must have been so. When I turned away in my ignorance, with a heavy heart, the dreadful blankness which had twice shut out from me the beings of my own race, was not between me and my dog. The poor little creature filled me with pity; I called him to me. He moved at the sound of my voice, and followed me languidly; not quite awakened yet from the trance of terror that had possessed him.

Before I had retired by more than a few steps, I thought I was conscious of the Presence again. I held out my longing arms to it. I waited in the hope of a touch to tell me that I might return. Perhaps I was answered by indirect means? I only know that a resolution to return to the same place, at the same hour, came to me, and quieted my mind.

The morning of the next day was dull and cloudy; but the rain held off I set forth again to the Gardens.

My dog ran on before me into the street—and stopped: waiting to see in which direction I might lead the way. When I turned towards the Gardens, he dropped behind me. In a little while I looked back. He was following me no longer; he stood irresolute. I called to him. He advanced a few steps—hesitated—and ran back to the house.

I went on by myself. Shall I confess my superstition? I thought the dog's desertion of me a bad omen.

Arrived at the tree, I placed myself under it. The minutes followed each other uneventfully. The cloudy sky darkened. The dull surface of the grass showed no shuddering consciousness of an unearthly creature passing over it.

I still waited, with an obstinacy which was fast becoming the obstinacy of despair. How long an interval elapsed, while I kept watch on the ground before me, I am not able to say. I only know that a change came.

Under the dull gray light I saw the grass move—but not as it had moved, on the day before. It shrivelled as if a flame had scorched it. No flame appeared. The brown underlying earth showed itself winding onward in a thin strip—which might have been a footpath traced in fire. It frightened me. I longed for the protection of the Invisible Presence; I prayed for a warning of it, if danger was near.

A touch answered me. It was as if a hand unseen had taken my hand—had raised it, little by little—had left it, pointing to the thin brown path that wound towards me under the shrivelled blades of grass.

I looked to the far end of the path.

The unseen hand closed on my hand with a warning pressure: the revelation of the coming danger was near me—I waited for it; I saw it.

The figure of a man appeared, advancing towards me along the thin brown path. I looked in his face as he came nearer. It showed me dimly the face of my husband's brother—John Zant.

The consciousness of myself as a living creature left me. I knew nothing; I felt nothing; I was dead.

When the torture of revival made me open my eyes, I found myself on the grass. Gentle hands raised my head, at the moment when I recovered my senses. Who had brought me to life again? Who was taking care of me?

I looked upward, and saw—bending over me—John Zant.

There the manuscript ended.

Some lines had been added on the last page; but they had been so carefully erased as to be illegible. These words of explanation appeared below the cancelled sentences:

“I had begun to write the little that remains to be told, when it struck me that I might, unintentionally, be exercising an unfair influence on your opinion. Let me only remind you that I believe absolutely in the supernatural revelation which I have endeavoured to describe. Remember this—and decide for me what I dare not decide for myself.”

There was no serious obstacle in the way of compliance with this request.

Judged from the point of view of the materialist, Mrs. Zant might no doubt be the victim of illusions (produced by a diseased state of the nervous system), which have been known to exist—as in the celebrated case of the bookseller, Nicolai, of Berlin—without being accompanied by derangement of the intellectual powers. But Mr. Rayburn was not asked to solve any such intricate problem as this. He had been merely instructed to read the manuscript, and to say what impression it had left on him of the mental condition of the writer; whose doubt of herself had been, in all probability, first suggested by remembrance of the illness from which she had suffered—brain-fever.

Under these circumstances, there could be little difficulty in forming an opinion. The memory which had recalled, and the judgment which had arranged, the succession of events related in the narrative revealed a mind in full possession of its resources.

Having satisfied himself so far, Mr. Rayburn abstained from considering the more serious question suggested by what he had read.

At any time, his habits of life and his ways of thinking would have rendered him unfit to weigh the arguments, which assert or deny supernatural revelation among the creatures of earth. But his mind was now so disturbed by the startling record of experience which he had just read, that he was only conscious of feeling certain impressions—without possessing the capacity to reflect on them. That his anxiety on Mrs. Zant's account had been increased, and that his doubts of Mr. John Zant had been encouraged, were the only practical results of the confidence placed in him of which he was thus far aware. In the ordinary exigencies of life a man of hesitating disposition, his interest in Mrs. Zant's welfare, and his desire to discover what had passed between her brother-in-law and herself, after their meeting in the Gardens, urged him into instant action. In half an hour more, he had arrived at her lodgings. He was at once admitted.

Mrs. Zant was alone, in an imperfectly lit room. "I hope you will excuse the bad light," she said; "my head has been burning as if the fever had come back again. Oh, don't go away! After what I have suffered, you don't know how dreadful it is to be alone."

The tone of her voice told him that she had been crying. He at once tried the best means of setting the poor lady at ease, by telling her of the conclusion at which he had arrived, after reading her manuscript. The happy result showed itself instantly: her face brightened, her manner changed; she was eager to hear more.

"Have I produced any other impression on you?" she asked.

He understood the allusion. Expressing sincere respect for her own convictions, he told her honestly that he was not prepared to enter on the obscure and terrible question of supernatural interposition. Grateful for the tone in which he had answered her, she wisely and delicately changed the subject.

"I must speak to you of my brother-in-law," she said. "He has told me of your visit; and I am anxious to know what you think of him. Do you like Mr. John Zant?"

Mr. Rayburn hesitated.

The care-worn look appeared again in her face. "If you had felt as kindly towards him as he feels towards you," she said, "I might have gone to St. Sallins with a lighter heart."

Mr. Rayburn thought of the supernatural appearances, described at the close of her narrative. "You believe in that terrible warning," he remonstrated; "and yet, you go to your brother-in-law's house!"

"I believe," she answered, "in the spirit of the man who loved me in the days of his earthly bondage. I am under *his* protection. What have I to do but to cast away my fears, and to wait in faith and hope? It might have helped my resolution if a friend had been near to encourage me." She paused and smiled sadly. "I must remember," she resumed, "that your way of understanding my position is not my way. I ought to have told you that Mr. John Zant feels needless anxiety about my health. He declares that he will not lose sight of me until his mind is at ease. It is useless to attempt to alter his opinion. He says my nerves are shattered—and who that sees me can doubt it? He tells me that my only chance of getting better is to try change of air and perfect repose—how can I contradict him? He reminds me that I have no relation but himself, and no house open to me but his own—and God knows he is right!"

She said those last words in accents of melancholy resignation, which grieved the good man whose one merciful purpose was to serve and console her. He spoke impulsively with the freedom of an old friend.

"I want to know more of you and Mr. John Zant, than I know now," he said. "My motive is a better one than mere curiosity. Do you believe that I feel a sincere interest in you?"

"With my whole heart."

That reply encouraged him to proceed with what he had to say. "When you recovered from your fainting-fit," he began, "Mr. John Zant asked questions, of course?"

"He asked what could possibly have happened, in such a quiet place as Kensington Gardens, to make me faint."

"And how did you answer?"

"Answer? I couldn't even look at him!"

"You said nothing?"

“Nothing. I don’t know what he thought of me; he might have been surprised, or he might have been offended.”

“Is he easily offended?” Mr. Rayburn asked.

“Not in my experience of him.”

“Do you mean your experience of him before your illness?”

“Yes. Since my recovery, his engagements with country patients have kept him away from London. I have not seen him since he took these lodgings for me. But he is always considerate. He has written more than once to beg that I will not think him neglectful, and to tell me (what I knew already through my poor husband) that he has no money of his own, and must live by his profession.”

“In your husband’s lifetime, were the two brothers on good terms?”

“Always. The one complaint I ever heard my husband make of John Zant was that he didn’t come to see us often enough, after our marriage. Is there some wickedness in him which we have never suspected? It may be—but *how* can it be? I have every reason to be grateful to the man against whom I have been supernaturally warned! His conduct to me has been always perfect. I can’t tell you what I owe to his influence in quieting my mind, when a dreadful doubt arose about my husband’s death.”

“Do you mean doubt if he died a natural death?”

“Oh, no! no! He was dying of rapid consumption—but his sudden death took the doctors by surprise. One of them thought that he might have taken an overdose of his sleeping drops, by mistake. The other disputed this conclusion, or there might have been an inquest in the house. Oh, don’t speak of it any more! Let us talk of something else. Tell me when I shall see you again.

“I hardly know. When do you and your brother-in-law leave London?”

“To-morrow.” She looked at Mr. Rayburn with a piteous entreaty in her eyes; she said timidly: “Do you ever go to the seaside, and take your dear little girl with you?”

The request, at which she had only dared to hint, touched on the idea which was at that moment in Mr. Rayburn’s mind.

Interpreted by his strong prejudice against John Zant, what she had said of her brother-in-law filled him with forebodings of peril to herself; all the more powerful in their influence, for this reason—that he shrank from distinctly realising them. If another person had been present at the interview, and had said to him afterwards: “That man’s reluctance to visit his sister-in-law, while her husband was living, is associated with a secret sense of guilt which her innocence cannot even imagine: he, and he alone, knows the cause of her husband’s sudden death: his feigned anxiety about her health is adopted as the safest means of enticing her into his house”—if those formidable conclusions had been urged on Mr. Rayburn, he would have felt it his duty to reject them, as unjustifiable aspersions on an absent man. And yet, when he took leave that evening of Mrs. Zant, he had pledged himself to give Lucy a holiday at the seaside; and he had said, without blushing, that the child really deserved it, as a reward for general good conduct and attention to her lessons!

Three days later, the father and daughter arrived towards evening at St. Sallins-on-Sea. They found Mrs. Zant at the station.

The poor woman's joy, on seeing them, expressed itself like the joy of a child. "Oh, I am so glad! so glad!" was all she could say when they met. Lucy was half-smothered with kisses, and was made supremely happy by a present of the finest doll she had ever possessed. Mrs. Zant accompanied her friends to the rooms which had been secured at the hotel. She was able to speak confidentially to Mr. Rayburn, while Lucy was in the balcony hugging her doll, and looking at the sea.

The one event that had happened during Mrs. Zant's short residence at St. Sallins, was the departure of her brother-in-law that morning, for London. He had been called away to operate on the feet of a wealthy patient who knew the value of his time: his housekeeper expected that he would return to dinner.

As to his conduct towards Mrs. Zant, he was not only as attentive as ever—he was almost oppressively affectionate in his language and manner. There was no service that a man could render which he had not eagerly offered to her. He declared that he already perceived an improvement in her health; he congratulated her on having decided to stay in his house; and (as a proof, perhaps, of his sincerity) he had repeatedly pressed her hand. "Have you any idea what all this means?" she said simply.

Mr. Rayburn kept his idea to himself. He professed ignorance; and asked next what sort of person the housekeeper was.

Mrs. Zant shook her head ominously.

"Such a strange creature," she said, "and in the habit of taking such liberties, that I begin to be afraid she is a little crazy."

"Is she an old woman?"

"No—only middle-aged. This morning, after her master had left the house, she actually asked me what I thought of my brother-in-law! I told her, as coldly as possible, that I thought he was very kind. She was quite insensible to the tone in which I had spoken; she went on from bad to worse. 'Do you call him the sort of man who would take the fancy of a young woman?' was her next question. She actually looked at me (I might have been wrong; and I hope I was) as if the 'young woman' she had in her mind was myself! I said, 'I don't think of such things, and I don't talk about them.' Still, she was not in the least discouraged; she made a personal remark next: 'Excuse me—but you do look wretchedly pale.' I thought she seemed to enjoy the defect in my complexion; I really believe it raised me in her estimation. 'We shall get on better in time,' she said; 'I'm beginning to like you.' She walked out humming a tune. Don't you agree with me? Don't you think she's crazy?"

"I can hardly give an opinion until I have seen her. Does she look as if she might have been a pretty woman at one time of her life?"

"Not the sort of pretty woman whom I admire!"

Mr. Rayburn smiled. "I was thinking," he resumed, "that this person's odd conduct may perhaps be accounted for. She is probably jealous of any young lady who is invited to her master's house—and (till she noticed your complexion) she began by being jealous of you."

Innocently at a loss to understand how *she* could become an object of the housekeeper's jealousy, Mrs. Zant looked at Mr. Rayburn in astonishment. Before she could give expression to her feeling of surprise, there was an interruption—a welcome interruption. A waiter entered the room, and announced a visitor; described as "a gentleman."

Mrs. Zant at once rose to retire.

"Who is the gentleman?" Mr. Rayburn asked—detaining Mrs. Zant as he spoke.

A voice which they both recognised answered gaily, from the outer side of the door:

“A friend from London.”

10

“Welcome to St. Sallins!” cried Mr. John Zant. “I knew that you were expected, my dear sir, and I took my chance of finding you at the hotel.” He turned to his sister-in-law, and kissed her hand with an elaborate gallantry worthy of Sir Charles Grandison himself. “When I reached home, my dear, and heard that you had gone out, I guessed that your object was to receive our excellent friend. You have not felt lonely while I have been away? That’s right! that’s right!” He looked towards the balcony, and discovered Lucy at the open window, staring at the magnificent stranger. “Your little daughter, Mr. Rayburn? Dear child! Come, and kiss me.”

Lucy answered in one positive word: “No.”

Mr. John Zant was not easily discouraged. “Show me your doll, darling,” he said. “Sit on my knee.”

Lucy answered in two positive words—“I won’t.”

Her father approached the window to administer the necessary reproof. Mr. John Zant interfered in the cause of mercy with his best grace. He held up his hands in cordial entreaty. “Dear Mr. Rayburn! The fairies are sometimes shy; and *this* little fairy doesn’t take to strangers at first sight. Dear child! All in good time. And what stay do you make at St. Sallins? May we hope that our poor attractions will tempt you to prolong your visit?”

He put his flattering little question with an ease of manner which was rather too plainly assumed; and he looked at Mr. Rayburn with a watchfulness which appeared to attach undue importance to the reply. When he said: “What stay do you make at St. Sallins?” did he really mean: “How soon do you leave us?” Inclining to adopt this conclusion, Mr. Rayburn answered cautiously, that his stay at the seaside would depend on circumstances. Mr. John Zant looked at his sister-in-law, sitting silent in a corner with Lucy on her lap. “Exert your attractions,” he said; “make the circumstances agreeable to our good friend. Will you dine with us to-day, my dear sir, and bring your little fairy with you?”

Lucy was far from receiving this complimentary allusion in the spirit in which it had been offered. “I’m not a fairy,” she declared. “I’m a child.”

“And a naughty child,” her father added, with all the severity that he could assume.

“I can’t help it, papa; the man with the big beard puts me out.”

The man with the big beard was amused—amiably, paternally amused—by Lucy’s plain speaking. He repeated his invitation to dinner; and he did his best to look disappointed when Mr. Rayburn made the necessary excuses.

“Another day,” he said (without, however, fixing the day). “I think you will find my house comfortable. My housekeeper may perhaps be eccentric—but in all essentials a woman in a thousand. Do you feel the change from London already? Our air at St. Sallins is really worthy of its reputation. Invalids who come here are cured as if by magic. What do you think of Mrs. Zant? How does she look?”

Mr. Rayburn was evidently expected to say that she looked better. He said it. Mr. John Zant seemed to have anticipated a stronger expression of opinion.

“Surprisingly better!” he pronounced. “Infinitely better! We ought both to be grateful. Pray believe that we *are* grateful.”

“If you mean grateful to me,” Mr. Rayburn remarked, “I don’t quite understand—”

“You don’t quite understand? Is it possible that you have forgotten our conversation when I first had the honour of receiving you? Look at Mrs. Zant again.”

Mr. Rayburn looked; and Mrs. Zant’s brother-in-law explained himself.

“You notice the return of her colour, the healthy brightness of her eyes. (No, my dear, I am not paying you idle compliments; I am stating plain facts.) For that happy result, Mr. Rayburn, we are indebted to you.”

“Surely not?”

“Surely yes! It was at your valuable suggestion that I thought of inviting my sister-in-law to visit me at St. Sallins. Ah, you remember it now. Forgive me if I look at my watch; the dinner hour is on my mind. Not, as your dear little daughter there seems to think, because I am greedy, but because I am always punctual, in justice to the cook. Shall we see you to-morrow? Call early, and you will find us at home.”

He gave Mrs. Zant his arm, and bowed and smiled, and kissed his hand to Lucy, and left the room. Recalling their interview at the hotel in London. Mr. Rayburn now understood John Zant’s object (on that occasion) in assuming the character of a helpless man in need of a sensible suggestion. If Mrs. Zant’s residence under his roof became associated with evil consequences, he could declare that she would never have entered the house but for Mr. Rayburn’s advice.

With the next day came the hateful necessity of returning this man’s visit.

Mr. Rayburn was placed between two alternatives. In Mrs. Zant’s interests he must remain, no matter at what sacrifice of his own inclinations, on good terms with her brother-in-law—or he must return to London, and leave the poor woman to her fate. His choice, it is needless to say, was never a matter of doubt. He called at the house, and did his innocent best—without in the least deceiving Mr. John Zant—to make himself agreeable during the short duration of his visit. Descending the stairs on his way out, accompanied by Mrs. Zant, he was surprised to see a middle-aged woman in the hall, who looked as if she was waiting there expressly to attract notice.

“The housekeeper,” Mrs. Zant whispered. “She is impudent enough to try to make acquaintance with you.”

This was exactly what the housekeeper was waiting in the hall to do.

“I hope you like our watering-place, sir,” she began. “If I can be of service to you, pray command me. Any friend of this lady’s has a claim on me—and you are an old friend, no doubt. I am only the housekeeper; but I presume to take a sincere interest in Mrs. Zant; and I am indeed glad to see you here. We none of us know—do we?—how soon we may want a friend. No offence, I hope? Thank you, sir. Good morning.”

There was nothing in the woman’s eyes which indicated an unsettled mind; nothing in the appearance of her lips which suggested habits of intoxication. That her strange outburst of familiarity proceeded from some strong motive seemed to be more than probable. Putting together what Mrs. Zant had already told him, and what he had himself observed, Mr. Rayburn suspected that the motive might be found in the housekeeper’s jealousy of her master.

Reflecting in the solitude of his own room, Mr. Rayburn felt that the one prudent course to take would be to persuade Mrs. Zant to leave St. Sallins. He tried to prepare her for this strong proceeding, when she came the next day to take Lucy out for a walk.

“If you still regret having forced yourself to accept your brother-in-law’s invitation,” was all he ventured to say, “don’t forget that you are perfect mistress of your own actions. You have only to come to me at the hotel, and I will take you back to London by the next train.

She positively refused to entertain the idea.

“I should be a thankless creature indeed,” she said, “if I accepted your proposal. Do you think I am ungrateful enough to involve you in a personal quarrel with John Zant? No! If I find myself forced to leave the house, I will go away alone.”

There was no moving her from this resolution. When she and Lucy had gone out together, Mr. Rayburn remained at the hotel, with a mind ill at ease. A man of readier mental resources might have felt at a loss how to act for the best, in the emergency that now confronted him. While he was still as far as ever from arriving at a decision, some person knocked at the door.

Had Mrs. Zant returned? He looked up as the door was opened, and saw to his astonishment—Mr. John Zant’s housekeeper.

“Don’t let me alarm you, sir,” the woman said. “Mrs. Zant has been taken a little faint, at the door of our house. My master is attending to her.”

“Where is the child?” Mr. Rayburn asked.

“I was bringing her back to you, sir, when we met a lady and her little girl at the door of the hotel. They were on their way to the beach—and Miss Lucy begged hard to be allowed to go with them. The lady said the two children were playfellows, and she was sure you would not object.”

“The lady is quite right. Mrs. Zant’s illness is not serious, I hope?”

“I think not, sir. But I should like to say something in her interests. May I? Thank you.” She advanced a step nearer to him, and spoke her next words in a whisper. “Take Mrs. Zant away from this place, and lose no time in doing it.”

Mr. Rayburn was on his guard. He merely asked:

“Why?”

The housekeeper answered in a curiously indirect manner—partly in jest, as it seemed, and partly in earnest.

“When a man has lost his wife,” she said, “there’s some difference of opinion in Parliament, as I hear, whether he does right or wrong, if he marries his wife’s sister. Wait a bit! I’m coming to the point. My master is one who has a long head on his shoulders; he sees consequences which escape the notice of people like me. In his way of thinking, if one man may marry his wife’s sister, and no harm done, where’s the objection if another man pays a compliment to the family, and marries his brother’s widow? My master, if you please, is that other man. Take the widow away before she marries him.”

This was beyond endurance.

“You insult Mrs. Zant,” Mr. Rayburn answered, “if you suppose that such a thing is possible!”

“Oh! I insult her, do I? Listen to me. One of three things will happen. She will be entrapped into consenting to it—or frightened into consenting to it—or drugged into consenting to it—”

Mr. Rayburn was too indignant to let her go on.

“You are talking nonsense,” he said. “There can be no marriage; the law forbids it.”

“Are you one of the people who see no farther than their noses?” she asked insolently. “Won’t the law take his money? Is he obliged to mention that he is related to her by marriage, when he buys the licence?” She paused; her humour changed; she stamped furiously on the floor. The true motive that animated her showed itself in her next words, and warned Mr. Rayburn to grant a more favourable hearing than he had accorded to her yet. “If you won’t stop it,” she burst out, “I

will! If he marries anybody, he is bound to marry ME. Will you take her away? I ask you, for the last time—will you take her away?”

The tone in which she made that final appeal to him had its effect.

“I will go back with you to John Zant’s house,” he said, “and judge for myself.”

She laid her hand on his arm:

“I must go first—or you may not be let in. Follow me in five minutes; and don’t knock at the street door.”

On the point of leaving him, she abruptly returned.

“We have forgotten something,” she said. “Suppose my master refuses to see you. His temper might get the better of him; he might make it so unpleasant for you that you would be obliged to go.”

“My temper might get the better of *me*,” Mr. Rayburn replied; “and—if I thought it was in Mrs. Zant’s interests—I might refuse to leave the house unless she accompanied me.”

“That will never do, sir.”

“Why not?”

“Because I should be the person to suffer.”

“In what way?”

“In this way. If you picked a quarrel with my master, I should be blamed for it because I showed you upstairs. Besides, think of the lady. You might frighten her out of her senses, if it came to a struggle between you two men.”

The language was exaggerated; but there was a force in this last objection which Mr. Rayburn was obliged to acknowledge.

“And, after all,” the housekeeper continued, “he has more right over her than you have. He is related to her, and you are only her friend.”

Mr. Rayburn declined to let himself be influenced by this consideration.

“Mr. John Zant is only related to her by marriage,” he said. “If she prefers trusting in me—come what may of it, I will be worthy of her confidence.”

The housekeeper shook her head.

“That only means another quarrel,” she answered. “The wise way, with a man like my master, is the peaceable way. We must manage to deceive him.”

“I don’t like deceit.”

“In that case, sir, I’ll wish you good-bye. We will leave Mrs. Zant to do the best she can for herself.”

Mr. Rayburn was unreasonable. He positively refused to adopt this alternative.

“Will you hear what I have got to say?” the housekeeper asked.

“There can be no harm in that,” he admitted. “Go on.”

She took him at his word.

“When you called at our house,” she began, “did you notice the doors in the passage, on the first floor? Very well. One of them is the door of the drawing-room, and the other is the door of the library. Do you remember the drawing-room, sir?”

“I thought it a large well-lit room,” Mr. Rayburn answered. “And I noticed a doorway in the wall, with a handsome curtain hanging over it.”

“That’s enough for our purpose,” the housekeeper resumed. “On the other side of the curtain, if you had looked in, you would have found the library. Suppose my master is as polite as usual, and begs to be excused for not receiving you, because it is an inconvenient time. And suppose

you are polite on your side, and take yourself off by the drawing-room door. You will find me waiting downstairs, on the first landing. Do you see it now?"

"I can't say I do."

"You surprise me, sir. What is to prevent us from getting back softly into the library, by the door in the passage? And why shouldn't we use that second way into the library as a means of discovering what may be going on in the drawing-room? Safe behind the curtain, you will see him if he behaves uncivilly to Mrs. Zant, or you will hear her if she calls for help. In either case, you may be as rough and ready with my master as you find needful; it will be he who has frightened her, and not you. And who can blame the poor housekeeper because Mr. Rayburn did his duty, and protected a helpless woman? There is my plan, sir. Is it worth trying?"

He answered, sharply enough: "I don't like it."

The housekeeper opened the door again, and wished him goodbye.

If Mr. Rayburn had felt no more than an ordinary interest in Mrs. Zant, he would have let the woman go. As it was, he stopped her; and, after some further protest (which proved to be useless), he ended in giving way.

"You promise to follow my directions?" she stipulated.

He gave the promise. She smiled, nodded, and left him. True to his instructions, Mr. Rayburn reckoned five minutes by his watch, before he followed her.

12

The housekeeper was waiting for him, with the street-door ajar.

"They are both in the drawing-room," she whispered, leading the way upstairs. "Step softly, and take him by surprise."

A table of oblong shape stood midway between the drawing-room walls. At the end of it which was nearest to the window, Mrs. Zant was pacing to and fro across the breadth of the room.

At the opposite end of the table, John Zant was seated. Taken completely by surprise, he showed himself in his true character. He started to his feet, and protested with an oath against the intrusion which had been committed on him.

Heedless of his action and his language, Mr. Rayburn could look at nothing; could think of nothing, but Mrs. Zant. She was still walking slowly to and fro, unconscious of the words of sympathy which he addressed to her, insensible even as it seemed to the presence of other persons in the room.

John Zant's voice broke the silence. His temper was under control again: he had his reasons for still remaining on friendly terms with Mr. Rayburn.

"I am sorry I forgot myself just now," he said.

Mr. Rayburn's interest was concentrated on Mrs. Zant: he took no notice of the apology.

"When did this happen?" he asked.

"About a quarter of an hour ago. I was fortunately at home. Without speaking to me, without noticing me, she walked upstairs like a person in a dream."

Mr. Rayburn suddenly pointed to Mrs. Zant.

"Look at her!" he said. "There's a change!"

All restlessness in her movements had come to an end. She was standing at the farther end of the table which was nearest to the window, in the full flow of sunlight pouring at that moment over her face. Her eyes looked out straight before her—void of all expression. Her lips were a little parted; her head drooped slightly towards her shoulder, in an attitude which suggested

listening for something or waiting for something. In the warm brilliant light, she stood before the two men, a living creature self-isolated in a stillness like the stillness of death.

John Zant was ready with the expression of his opinion.

“A nervous seizure,” he said. “Something resembling catalepsy, as you see.”

“Have you sent for a doctor?”

“A doctor is not wanted.”

“I beg your pardon. It seems to me that medical help is absolutely necessary.”

“Be so good as to remember,” Mr. John Zant answered, “that the decision rests with me, as the lady’s relative. I am sensible of the honour which your visit confers on me. But the time has been unhappily chosen. Forgive me if I suggest that you will do well to retire.”

Mr. Rayburn had not forgotten the housekeeper’s advice, or the promise which she had exacted from him. But the expression in John Zant’s face was a serious trial to his self-control. He hesitated, and looked back at Mrs. Zant.

If he provoked a quarrel by remaining in the room, the one alternative would be the removal of her by force. Fear of the consequences to herself, if she was suddenly and roughly roused from her trance, was the one consideration which reconciled him to submission. He withdrew.

The housekeeper was waiting for him below, on the first landing. When the door of the drawing-room had been closed again, she signed to him to follow her, and returned up the stairs. After another struggle with himself, he obeyed. They entered the library from the corridor—and placed themselves behind the closed curtain which hung over the doorway. It was easy so to arrange the edge of the drapery as to observe, without exciting suspicion, whatever was going on in the next room.

Mrs. Zant’s brother-in-law was approaching her, at the time when Mr. Rayburn saw him again.

In the instant afterwards, she moved—before he had completely passed over the space between them. Her still figure began to tremble. She lifted her drooping head. For a moment, there was a shrinking in her—as if she had been touched by something. She seemed to recognise the touch: she was still again.

John Zant watched the change. It suggested to him that she was beginning to recover her senses. He tried the experiment of speaking to her.

“My love, my sweet angel, come to the heart that adores you!” He advanced again; he passed into the flood of sunlight pouring over her.

“Rouse yourself!” he said.

She still remained in the same position; apparently at his mercy, neither hearing him nor seeing him.

“Rouse yourself!” he repeated. “My darling, come to me!”

At the instant when he attempted to embrace her—at the instant when Mr. Rayburn rushed into the room—John Zant’s arms, suddenly turning rigid, remained outstretched. With a shriek of horror, he struggled to draw them back—struggled, in the empty brightness of the sunshine, as if some invisible grip had seized him.

“What has got me?” the wretch screamed. “Who is holding my hands? Oh, the cold of it! the cold of it!”

His features became convulsed; his eyes turned upwards until only the white eye-balls were visible. He fell prostrate with a crash that shook the room.

The housekeeper ran in. She knelt by her master’s body. With one hand she loosened his cravat. With the other she pointed to the end of the table.

Mrs. Zant still kept her place; but there was another change. Little by little, her eyes recovered their natural living expression—then slowly closed. She tottered backwards from the table, and lifted her hands wildly, as if to grasp at something which might support her. Mr. Rayburn hurried to her before she fell—lifted her in his arms—and carried her out of the room.

One of the servants met them in the hall. He sent her for a carriage. In a quarter of an hour more, Mrs. Zant was safe under his care at the hotel.

13

That night a note, written by the housekeeper, was delivered to Mrs. Zant.

The doctors give little hope. The paralytic stroke is spreading upwards to his face. If death spares him, he will live a helpless man. I shall take care of him to the last. As for you—forget him.

Mrs. Zant gave the note to Mr. Rayburn.

“Read it, and destroy it,” she said. “It is written in ignorance of the terrible truth.”

He obeyed—and looked at her in silence, waiting to hear more. She hid her face. The few words that she addressed to him, after a struggle with herself, fell slowly and reluctantly from her lips.

She said, “No mortal hand held the hands of John Zant. The guardian spirit was with me. The promised protection was with me. I know it. I wish to know no more.”

Having spoken, she rose to retire. He opened the door for her, seeing that she needed rest in her own room.

Left by himself, he began to consider the prospect that was before him in the future. How was he to regard the woman who had just left him? As a poor creature weakened by disease, the victim of her own nervous delusion? or as the chosen object of a supernatural revelation—unparalleled by any similar revelation that he had heard of, or had found recorded in books? His first discovery of the place that she really held in his estimation dawned on his mind, when he felt himself recoiling from the conclusion which presented her to his pity, and yielding to the nobler conviction which felt with her faith, and raised her to a place apart among other women.

14

They left St. Sallins the next day.

Arrived at the end of the journey, Lucy held fast by Mrs. Zant’s hand. Tears were rising in the child’s eyes. “Are we to bid her good-bye?” she said sadly to her father.

He seemed to be unwilling to trust himself to speak; he only said, “My dear, ask her yourself.”

But the result justified him. Lucy was happy again.