

THE BLACK ROBE.

BY WILKIE COLLINS.

THE WOMAN IN WHITE, "THE MOON STONE," "AFTER DARK," "NO NAME," "MAN AND WIFE," "THE LAW AND THE LADY," "THE NEW MAGDALEN," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER II.—ROSE AND ROMAYNE.

On the next day Penrose arrived on his visit to Romayne. The affectionate meeting between the two men tested Stella's self-control as it had never been tried yet. She submitted to the ordeal with the courage of a woman whose happiness depended on her outward graciousness of manner toward her husband's friend. Her reception of Penrose, viewed as an act of refined courtesy, was beyond reproach. When she found her opportunity of leaving the room, Romayne gratefully opened the door for her. "Thank you!" he whispered, with a look which was intended to reward her.

She only bowed to him, and took refuge in her own room. Even in this woman's nature degraded by the facilities of language and manner which the artificial condition of modern society exacts from her. When she yields herself to more serious reflections, intended to protect her dearest domestic interests, the mischief is increased in proportion. Deceit, which is the natural weapon of defence used by the weak creature against the strong, then ceases to be confined within the limits assigned by the scene of self-respect and by the restraints of education. A woman in this position will descend, self-blinded, to anything to her if they were related to another person. Stella had already begun the process of self-degradation by writing secretly to Winterfield. It was only to warn him of the danger of trusting Father Benwell—but it was a letter claiming him as her accomplice in an act of deception. That morning she had received Penrose with the outward cordialities of welcome which are offered to an old and dear friend. And now, in the safe solitude of her room, she had fallen to plover deep still. She was deliberately considering the safest means of acquitting herself with the confidential conversation which Romayne and Penrose would certainly hold when she left them together. "He will try to let my husband against me, and I have a right to know what means he uses in my own defense." With that thought she reconciled her self to an action which she would have despised if she had heard of it as the

It was a beautiful autumn day, bright and clear sunshine, enlivened by crisp air. Stella put on her hat and went out for a stroll in the grounds. While she was viewing from the windows of the servants' offices she walked away from the house. Turning the corner of a shrubbery, she entered a winding path on the other side, which led back to the lawn under Romayne's study window. Garden chairs were placed here and there. She took one of them and seated herself—after a last moment of hesitating—where she could hear the men's voices through the open window above her.

Penrose was speaking at the time. "Yes, Father Benwell has granted me a holiday," he said; "but I don't come here to be an idle man. You must allow me to employ my term of leave in the pleasantest of all ways. I mean to be your secretary again."

Romayne sighed. "Ah, if you knew how I have missed you!" Stella waited in breathless expectation for what Penrose would say to this. Would he speak of her? No. There was a natural tact and delicacy in him which would lead to introduce the subject.

Penrose only said: "How is the great work getting on?" The answer was sternly spoken in one word: "Badly!" "I am surprised to hear that, Romayne."

"Why? Were you so innocently hopeful as I was? Did you expect my experience of married life to help me in writing my book?" "I have replied after a pause, speaking a little sadly."

"I expected your married life to encourage you in all your highest aspirations," he said. Stella turned pale with suppressed indignation. He had spoken with perfect sincerity. She had believed that he lied for the express purpose of rousing indignation against her in her husband's irritable mind. She listened indignantly for Romayne's answer.

He made no answer. Penrose changed the subject. "You are not looking very well," he gently resumed. "I am afraid your health has interfered with your work. Have you had any return?"

It was one of the characteristics of Romayne's nervous irritability that he never liked to hear the terrible delusion of the voice referred to in words. "Yes," he interposed, bitterly; "I have heard it again and again. My right hand is as red as ever, Penrose, with the blood of a fellow-creature. Another destruction of my illusions, when I married!"

"Romayne, I don't like to hear you speak of your marriage in that way." "Oh, very well. I shall go on better with it now you are here to help me. My ambition to make a strong hold on the world has never taken so strong a hold on me. I don't know why, unless other disappointments have had something to do with it as at this time, when I find I can't give my mind to my work. We will make a last effort together, my friend. If it fails we will put my manuscripts into the fire, and I will try some other career. Politics are open to me. Through politics I might make my mark in diplomacy. There is something in directing the destinies of nations wonderfully attractive to me in my present

state of feeling. I hate the idea of being indebted for my position in the world, like the veriest fool living, to the accident of birth and fortune. Are you not with the obscure life that you live? Do you not envy that priest (he is far than I am) who was sent the other day as the Pope's ambassador to Portugal?"

Penrose spoke out at last without any hesitation: "You are in a thoroughly unwholesome state of mind," he said. Romayne laughed recklessly. "When was I ever in a healthy state of mind?" he asked. Penrose passed the interruption over without notice. "If I am to do you any good," he resumed, "I must know what is really the matter with you. The very last question that I ought to put, and that I wish to put, is the question which you force me to ask."

"What is it?" "When you speak of your married life," said Penrose, "your tone is the tone of a disappointed man. Have you any serious reason to complain of Mrs. Romayne?"

Stella rose to her feet in her eagerness to hear what her husband's answer would be. "Serious reasons!" Romayne repeated. "How can such an idea have entered your head? I only complain of irritating trifles now and then. Even the best of women is not perfect. It's hard to expect it from any of them."

The interpretation of this reply depended entirely on the tone in which it was spoken. What was the animating spirit in this case? Irony? or indulgence? Stella was ignorant of the indirect methods of irritation, by means of which Father Benwell had encouraged Romayne's doubts of his wife's motive for the reception of Winterfield. Her husband's tone, expressing this state of mind, was new to her. She sat down again, divided between hope and fear, waiting to hear more. The next words, spoken by Penrose, assumed the tone of a friend. "The priest, actually took the wife's side!"

"Romayne," he proceeded, quietly, "I will try and tell you. I believe your wife to be a good woman. I believe she loves you. There is something in her face that speaks for her—even to an inexperienced person like myself. Don't be impatient with her! Put away from you that besetting temptation to speak in irony—it is so easy to take that tone, and sometimes so cruel. I am only a looker-on, I know. Domestic happiness can never be the happiness of my life. But I have observed my fellow-creatures of all degrees—and this I tell you is the result. The largest number of happy men are the husbands and fathers. Yes; I admit that they have terrible anxieties—but they are fortified by unflinching compensations and encouragements. Only one man I have known with a man who had suffered the loss of fortune and worse still the loss of health. He endured these afflictions manly that he surprised me. 'What is the secret of your philosophy?' I asked. He answered: 'I can bear anything while I have my wife and my children. Think of the man who judges for himself what his greatest happiness may have left yet unachieved in your married life.'"

Those words touched Stella's highest nature, as the word touches the throb of ground. Surely they were nobly spoken! How would her husband receive them? "I must think with your mind, Penrose, before I can do what you ask me. Is there any method of transformation by which I can change natures with you? That was all he said, and he said it despondently. Penrose understood and felt for him. "If there is anything in my nature worthy to be set as an example to you," he replied, "you know to what blessed influence I owe self-discipline and serenity of mind. Remember what I said when I left you in London to go back to my friendless life. I told you that I found in the faith I held the one sufficient consolation which helped me to bear my loss. And if there came a time of sorrow in the future—I entreat you to remember what I had said. Have you remembered it?"

"Look at the book here on my desk—look at the other books, within easy reach, on that table—are you satisfied?" "More than satisfied. Tell me—do you feel nearer to understanding of the faith which I have tried to convert you?"

"There was a pause. 'Say that I do feel nearer,' Romayne resumed—'I do that some of my objections are removed, are you really as eager as ever to convert me now that I am a married man?' 'I am even more eager,' Penrose answered. 'I have always believed that you were sure way to happiness lay through your conversion. Now, when I know from what I have seen and heard in this room, that you are not reconciled, as you should be, to your new life, I am doubly confirmed in my belief. As God is my witness, I speak sincerely. Hestiate no longer! Be converted and be happy.'"

"Have you not forgotten something, Penrose?" "A serious consideration, perhaps. I have a Protestant wife."

"I have borne that in mind, Romayne, throughout our conversation."

"And you still say—what you have just said?" "With my whole heart, I say it! Be converted and be happy. Be happy and you will be a good husband. I speak in your wife's interest as well as in yours. People who are happy in each other's society will help a little on either side, even on questions of religious belief. And perhaps there will follow a more profitable result still. So far as I have observed, a good husband's example is gladly followed by his wife. Don't think that I am trying to persuade you against your wife! I am only telling you, in my own justification, from true motives of love for yourself, and of true interest in your welfare, I speak. You implied just now that you had still some objections left. If I can remove them, well and good. If I fail—if you cannot act on purely conscientious conviction—I not only advise, I entreat, you

to remain as you are. I shall be the first to acknowledge that you would do right. This moderation of tone would appear irresistibly (as Stella well knew) to her husband's ready appreciation of those good qualities in others which he did not himself possess. Once more her suspicion wronged Penrose. Had he his own interested motives for pleading her cause? At the bare thought of it she left her chair, and, standing under the window, boldly interrupted the conversation by calling to Romayne. "Lewis!" she cried, "why do you stay indoors on this beautiful day? I am sure Mr. Penrose would like a walk on the grounds."

Penrose appeared alone at the window. "You are quite right, Mrs. Romayne," he said, "I will join you directly."

In a few minutes he turned the corner of the house and met Stella on the lawn. Romayne was not with him. "Is my husband not coming with us?" she asked. "He will follow us," Penrose answered. "I believe he has some letters to write."

Stella looked at him, expecting some underhand exercise of influence on her husband. "If he had been able to estimate the noble qualities in the nature of Penrose, she might have done him the justice to arrive at a truer conclusion. It was he who asked leave to take the opportunity of speaking alone with Mrs. Romayne. He had said to his friend: 'If I am wrong in my view of the effect of your change of religion on your wife, let me find it out from herself. My own object is to act justly toward you and toward her. I should never forgive myself if I made mischief between you, no matter how innocent any evil intention I might be. It was Stella's misfortune ignorantly to misinterpret everything that Penrose said or did, for the all-sufficient reason that he was a priest. She had drawn the conclusion that her husband (on the point of conversion himself) had deliberately left her alone with Penrose, to be persuaded or deluded into giving her sanction to aid the influence of the priest. They shall find they are mistaken," she thought to herself.

"Have I interrupted an interesting conversation?" she inquired, abruptly. "When I asked you to come out over you talking to my husband about his historical work?" "No, Mrs. Romayne, we were not speaking at that time of the book."

"May I ask an old question, Mr. Penrose?" "Certainly." "Are you a very zealous Catholic?" "Pardon me, I am a priest. Surely, by profession speaks for me?" "I have seen some of your converts, Mr. Penrose, and looked at her attentively. 'Are you strongly opposed to your husband's conversion?' he asked. 'As strongly,' she answered, 'as a woman can be.'"

"By religious conviction, Mrs. Romayne?" "No, by experience."

"Penrose started. 'Is it indiscreet,' he said, gently, 'to inquire what your experience may have been?' 'I will tell you what my experience has been,' Stella replied. 'I am ignorant of theological subtleties, and questions of doctrine are quite beyond me. But this I do know: a well-meaning and zealous Catholic shortened my father's life, and separated me from an only sister whom I dearly loved. I see I shock you—and I dare say you think I am exaggerating.'"

"I hear what you say, Mrs. Romayne, with very great pain—I don't presume to form any opinion thus far."

"My soul can be told in a few words," Stella proceeded. "When my elder sister was still a young girl, she came to stay with my mother's sister, who was a Catholic. She was married, and she was, as I have said, a zealous Catholic. Unknown to the rest of us she held conversations on the point of conversion with a part of the girl's nature—and accomplished her conversion. Other influences, of which I know nothing, were afterward brought to bear on my sister. She declared her intention of entering a convent. As she was under age, my father had only to interpose his authority to prevent this. She was his favorite child. He had no heart to retain her by force—he could only try all that the kindest and best of fathers could do to persuade her to remain at home. Even after that year that has passed, I cannot trust myself to speak of it compositely. She persisted; she was as hard as stone. My aunt, when she was entreated to intercede, called her heartless obstinacy 'a vocation.' My poor father's loving resistance was worn out; he slowly drew near, and nearer to death from the day when she left us. Let me do her justice as I can. She has not only never regretted entering the convent—she is happily absorbed in her religious duties and she has not the slightest wish to see her mother or me. My mother's patience was soon worn out. The last time I went to the convent I went by myself. I shall never do there again. She could not conceal her sense of relief when I took my leave of her. I need say no more. Arguments are thrown away on me. Mr. Penrose, after what I have seen and felt. I have no right to expect that the consideration of my happiness will influence you—but I may perhaps ask you, as a gentleman, to tell me the truth. Do you come here with the purpose of converting my husband?"

Penrose opened the truth without an instant's hesitation. "I cannot take your view of your sister's pious devotion of herself to a religious life," he said. "But I can and will answer you truly. From the time when I first knew him, my dearest object has been to convert your husband."

"But I am bound as a Christian," he went on, "to do unto others as I would they should do to me." She turned on him suddenly, her beautiful face radiant with hope, her hand trembling as it caught him by the arm. "Speak plainly!" she cried. He obeyed her to the letter. "The happiness of my friend's wife, Mrs. Romayne, is sacred to me for his sake. Be the good angel of your husband's life. I abandon the purpose of converting him."

He lifted her hand from his arm and raised it respectfully to his lips. Then, when he had bound himself by a promise that was sacred to him, he said to himself as he left her: "God forgive me if I have done wrong!"

CHAPTER III.—WINTERFIELD RETURNS. Twice Father Benwell called at Derwent's hotel, and there he was informed that no news had been received there of Mr. Winterfield. At the third attempt his constancy was rewarded. Mr. Winterfield had written and was expected to arrive at the hotel by 6 o'clock.

It was then half-past four. Father Benwell decided to wait the return of his friend. He was anxious to deliver the packet intrusted to him. The re-sealed packet was safe in the pocket of his long black frock-coat. His own future proceedings depended, in some degree, on the course which Winterfield might take, when he had read the confession of the unhappy woman who had once been his wife.

Would he show the letter to Stella, as a private letter; or, as an unenviable proof that she had cruelly wronged him? And would it in this case be desirable if the thing could be done so to handle circumstances, as that Romayne might be present, unseen, and might discover the truth for himself? In the other event—that is to say, if Winterfield obtained from communicating the confession to Stella—the responsibility of making the necessary disclosure must remain with the priest. In his present uncertainty he could only decide to pay another visit to Ten Acres Lodge, and discover how Penrose was prospering in the all-important matter of Romayne's conversion.

Father Benwell walked softly up and down the room, looking about him with quietly-observant eyes. A side-table in a corner was covered with letters, waiting Winterfield's return. Always ready for information of any sort, he even looked at the addresses on the letters. Some time he had observed the customary variety of character. All but three of the envelopes showed the London district postmarks. Two of the other letters (addressed to Winterfield at his club) bore foreign postmarks; and one, as the altered direction showed, had been forwarded from Benmark.

This last letter especially attracted the priest's attention. The address was apparently in a woman's handwriting. And it was worthy of remark that she appeared to be the only person among Winterfield's correspondents who was not acquainted with his address, his hotel or his club. The intriguing intellect of Father Benwell guessed itself by speculation even on such a trifling problem as this. He little thought that he had a personal interest in the letter. The envelope contained Stella's warning to Winterfield to distrust no less a person than Father Benwell himself!

It was nearly half-past five before quick footsteps were audible outside Winterfield's room. "This is friendly indeed!" he said. "I expected to return to the worst of all solitudes—solitude in a hotel. You will stay and dine with me? That's right. You must have thought I was going to settle in Paris. Do you know what has kept me so long? The most delightful theater in the world—the Opera Comique. I am so fond of the hygone school of music, Father Benwell—the flowing, graceful, delicious melodies of the composer who followed Mozart. One can only enjoy that music in Paris. Would you believe that I waited a week to hear Nicolò's delightful 'Joan of Arc' on Monday night. I was almost the only young man in the stalls. All round me were the old men who remember the first performances of the opera, beating time with their wrinkled hands to the tunes which were associated with the happiest days of their lives. Wasn't that a treat? My dog! I was obliged to leave him here, and he knows I have come back!"

He flew to the door and called down the stairs to have the dog set free. The spaniel rushed into the room and leaped into his master's outstretched arms. Winterfield returned his caresses, and kissed him as tenderly as a woman might have kissed her pet. "Dear old fellow! it's a shame to have left you; I won't do it again. Father Benwell, have you as many friends who would be as glad to see you as this friend of mine? And there are more!"

"I have not a single one," he said. "I might be disgraced in the estimation of every human creature I know, and he would be as true to me as ever. And look at his physical qualities. What an oak he is! For instance—I won't say anything there—I will say, my ears, crumpled and wrinkled and naked. Look at the beautiful silky covering of his ears! What are our senses of smelling and hearing compared to his? We are proud of our reason. Could we find our way round him, if they shut us up in a basket and took us to a strange place away from home? If he would but run down stairs in a hurry, which of us is surest against breaking his neck—on my poor two legs or on his? Who is the happy mortal who gets up without unbuttoning, and goes up again without buttoning? Here he is, on my lap, knowing I am talking about him, and too fond of me to say to himself, 'What a fool my master is!'"

Father Benwell listened to this rhapsody—so characteristic of the childish simplicity of the man—with an inward sense of impatience, which never once showed itself on the smiling surface of his face.

The following suggestive facts, says Dr. Fove's "Lives of the Kings," are gathered from Professor Atwater's paper before the annual meeting of the Fish-cultural Association: Fish consists of waste matter and shells. The waste consists of bones, skin, entrails, etc.; the flesh of water and two solids; the solids are the nutritive material. The proportions of waste in different samples vary widely: a pound of halibut yields only eighteen per cent; making the halibut the cheaper fish at a higher price. The least waste to be found in fish, said, far as the fish is concerned, is the cod. The practical application of these facts is of the utmost value. The same nutritive substance in the different samples of fish was found to vary in weight from forty cents to \$8 a pound. The high price, being in mind, being for fish having the greatest waste. "It makes little difference," it is added, "to the man with \$5,000 a year, if he is found for the albinoids in food provided it suits his palate; but to the housewife whose family must be supported upon \$500 a year it is a matter of great importance."

A BEASTLY KING.

His Majesty, the White Elephant, a Kuler in Siam.

White cows, rats, mice and hares are common and easily distinguished; but it differs with the white elephant. The elephant is not so common, and is not so easily distinguished. It is a large animal, and is found in the mountains of the East Indies. It is a very intelligent animal, and is used by the natives for making cordage, fish lines, nets, hammocks, etc. A resident of New York representing a company which intended to send out machinery for preparing the silk for market, on a large scale, has received a concession from the Government of Honduras.

The other power referred to is Guatemala, or Guatemal, which is the prepared milk of a tree closely resembling the nondescript rubber tree. It is a very strong and durable material, and is used by the natives for making cordage, fish lines, nets, hammocks, etc. A resident of New York representing a company which intended to send out machinery for preparing the silk for market, on a large scale, has received a concession from the Government of Honduras.

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VEGETABLE SILK.

The Tano Gum Tree—A Substitute for Oak Bark.

The American consul at Russian Honduras, writes interestingly of two products which promise to be of considerable importance. One is a fibre known as silk grass or jute, a perennial and easily cultivated plant, which grows wild and covers vast tracts along the edges of the rivers and lagoons of Honduras. It contains over thirty per cent of the finest silk; this is the consular language, but, of course, he means that it is practically equal to the best of ordinary elephants. The light gray silk is uniform all over, the spots on the trunk being white. The depth of the color, however, varies greatly, and there are often blemishes in shape of rain or otherwise eligible candidates. It has been, therefore, found necessary to be on the alert for the best specimens, which will demonstrate the right of the animal to his title. The Burmese skilled men fix upon two of these as superior to all others. One is that the elephant shall have five toes instead of four. This is a good way of making certain, but occasionally there are the indubitably black elephants which have the sixth number of toes. They are white elephants debased by suffering from the evil Khama of previous existence, and ineligible for the sacred number of toes. The other test is considered perfectly decisive, no matter what the precise tint of the skin may be. It is this: If you pour water on a white elephant's trunk, while a black elephant only comes blacker than ever. This is the final test always resorted to in Mandalay.

The importance attached to the possession of a white elephant is traceable to the Buddhist system. The last avatar of Gautama Buddha, before he came down upon earth to "teach the law and give the millions peace," was in the shape of a white elephant. It is a sacred animal, and is considered perfectly decisive, no matter what the precise tint of the skin may be. It is this: If you pour water on a white elephant's trunk, while a black elephant only comes blacker than ever. This is the final test always resorted to in Mandalay.

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