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[Authors](#)
[Contact](#)

[The Law and the Lady](#)

[Wilkie Collins](#)

This Book:

[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 10 - The Search

THE fire burning in the grate was not a very large one; and the outer air (as I had noticed on my way to the house) had something of a wintry sharpness in it that day.

Still, my first feeling, when Major Fitz-David left me, was a feeling of heat and oppression, with its natural result, a difficulty in breathing freely. The nervous agitation of the time was, I suppose, answerable for these sensations. I took off my bonnet and mantle and gloves, and opened the window for a little while. Nothing was to be seen outside but a paved courtyard, with a skylight in the middle, closed at the further end by the wall of the Major's stables. A few minutes at the window cooled and refreshed me. I shut it down again, and took my first step on the way of discovery. In other words, I began my first examination of the four walls around me, and of all that they inclosed.

I was amazed at my own calmness. My interview with Major Fitz-David had, perhaps, exhausted my capacity for feeling any strong emotion, for the time at least. It was a relief to me to be alone; it was a relief to me to begin the search. Those were my only sensations so far.

The shape of the room was oblong. Of the two shorter walls, one contained the door in grooves which I have already mentioned as communicating with the front room; the other was almost entirely occupied by the broad window which looked out on the courtyard.

Taking the doorway wall first, what was there, in the shape of furniture, on either side of it? There was a card-table on either side. Above each card-table stood a magnificent china bowl placed on a gilt and carved bracket fixed to the wall.

I opened the card-tables. The drawers beneath contained nothing but cards, and the usual counters and markers. With the exception of one pack, the cards in both tables were still wrapped in their paper covers exactly as they had come from the shop. I examined the loose pack, card by card. No writing, no mark of any kind, was visible on any one of them. Assisted by a library ladder which stood against the book-case, I looked next into the two china bowls. Both were perfectly empty. Was there anything more to examine on that side of the room? In the two corners there were two little chairs of inlaid wood, with red silk cushions. I turned them up and looked under the cushions, and still I made no discoveries. When I had put the chairs back in their places my search on one side of the room was complete. So far I had found nothing.

I crossed to the opposite wall, the wall which contained the window.

The window (occupying, as I have said, almost the entire length and height of the wall) was divided into three compartments, and was adorned at their extremity by handsome curtains of dark red velvet. The ample heavy folds of the velvet left just room at the two corners of the wall for two little upright cabinets in buhl, containing rows of drawers, and supporting two fine bronze productions (reduced in size) of the Venus Milo and the Venus Callipyge. I had Major Fitz-David's permission to do just what I pleased. I opened the six drawers in each cabinet, and examined their contents without hesitation.

Beginning with the cabinet in the right-hand corner, my investigations were soon completed. All the six drawers were alike occupied by a collection of fossils, which (judging by the curious paper inscriptions fixed on some of them) were associated with a past period of the Major's life when he had speculated, not very successfully in mines. After satisfying myself that the drawers contained nothing but the fossils and their inscriptions, I turned to the cabinet in the left-hand corner next.

Here a variety of objects was revealed to view, and the examination accordingly occupied a much longer time.

The top drawer contained a complete collection of carpenter's tools in miniature, relics probably of the far-distant time when the Major was a boy, and when parents or friends had made him a present of a set of toy tools. The second drawer was filled with toys of another sort--presents made to Major Fitz-David by his fair friends. Embroidered braces, smart smoking-caps, quaint pincushions, gorgeous slippers, glittering purses, all bore witness to the popularity of the friend of the women. The contents of the third drawer were of a less interesting sort: the entire space was filled with old account-books, ranging over a period of many years. After looking into each book, and opening and shaking it uselessly, in search of any loose papers which might be hidden between the leaves, I came to the fourth drawer, and found more relics of past pecuniary transactions in the shape of receipted bills, neatly tied together, and each inscribed at the back. Among the bills I found nearly a dozen loose papers, all equally unimportant. The fifth drawer was in sad confusion. I took out first a loose bundle of ornamental cards, each containing the list of dishes at past banquets given or attended by the Major in London or Paris; next, a box full of delicately tinted quill pens (evidently a lady's gift); next, a quantity of old invitation cards; next, some dog's-eared French plays and books of the opera; next, a pocket-corkscrew, a bundle of cigarettes, and a bunch of rusty keys; lastly, a passport, a set of luggage labels, a broken silver snuff-box, two cigar-cases, and a torn map of Rome. "Nothing anywhere to interest me," I thought, as I closed the fifth, and opened the sixth and last drawer.

The sixth drawer was at once a surprise and a disappointment. It literally contained nothing but the fragments of a broken vase.

I was sitting, at the time, opposite to the cabinet, in a low chair. In the momentary irritation caused by my discovery of the emptiness of the last drawer, I had just lifted my foot to push it back into its place, when the door communicating with the hall opened, and Major Fitz-David stood before me.

His eyes, after first meeting mine, traveled downward to my foot. The instant he noticed the open drawer I saw a change in his face. It was only for a moment; but in that moment he looked at me with a sudden suspicion and surprise--looked as if he had caught me with my hand on the clew.

"Pray don't let me disturb you," said Major Fitz-David. "I have only come here to ask you a question."

"What is it, Major?"

"Have you met with any letters of mine in the course of your investigations?"

"I have found none yet," I answered. "If I do discover any letters, I shall, of course, not take the liberty of examining them."

"I wanted to speak to you about that," he rejoined. "It only struck me a moment since, upstairs, that my letters might embarrass you. In your place I should feel some distrust of anything which I was not at liberty to examine. I think I can set this matter right, however, with very little trouble to either of us. It is no violation of any

promises or pledges on my part if I simply tell you that my letters will not assist the discovery which you are trying to make. You can safely pass them over as objects that are not worth examining from your point of view. You understand me, I am sure?"

"I am much obliged to you, Major--I quite understand."

"Are you feeling any fatigue?"

"None whatever, thank you."

"And you still hope to succeed? You are not beginning to be discouraged already?"

"I am not in the least discouraged. With your kind leave, I mean to persevere for some time yet."

I had not closed the drawer of the cabinet while we were talking, and I glanced carelessly, as I answered him, at the fragments of the broken vase. By this time he had got his feelings under perfect command. He, too, glanced at the fragments of the vase with an appearance of perfect indifference. I remembered the look of suspicion and surprise that had escaped him on entering the room, and I thought his indifference a little overacted.

"_That_ doesn't look very encouraging," he said, with a smile, pointing to the shattered pieces of china in the drawer.

"Appearances are not always to be trusted," I replied. "The wisest thing I can do in my present situation is to suspect everything, even down to a broken vase."

I looked hard at him as I spoke. He changed the subject.

"Does the music upstairs annoy you?" he asked.

"Not in the least, Major."

"It will soon be over now. The singing-master is going, and the Italian master has just arrived. I am sparing no pains to make my young prima donna a most accomplished person. In learning to sing she must also learn the language which is especially the language of music. I shall perfect her in the accent when I take her to Italy. It is the height of my ambition to have her mistaken for an Italian when she sings in public. Is there anything I can do before I leave you again? May I send you some more champagne? Please say yes!"

"A thousand thanks, Major. No more champagne for the present."

He turned at the door to kiss his hand to me at parting. At the same moment I saw his eyes wander slyly toward the book-case. It was only for an instant. I had barely detected him before he was out of the room.

Left by myself again, I looked at the book-case--looked at it attentively for the first time.

It was a handsome piece of furniture in ancient carved oak, and it stood against the wall which ran parallel with the hall of the house. Excepting the space occupied in the upper corner of the room by the second door, which opened into the hall, the book-case filled the whole length of the wall down to the window. The top was ornamented by vases, candelabra, and statuettes, in pairs, placed in a row. Looking along the row, I noticed a vacant space on the top of the bookcase at the extremity of it which was nearest to the window. The opposite extremity, nearest to the door, was occupied by a handsome painted vase of a very peculiar pattern. Where was the corresponding vase, which ought to have been placed at the corresponding extremity of the book-case? I returned to the open sixth drawer of the cabinet, and looked in again. There was no mistaking the pattern on the fragments when I examined them now. The vase which had been broken was the vase which had stood in the place now vacant on the top of the book-case at the end nearest to the window.

Making this discovery, I took out the fragments, down to the smallest morsel of the shattered china, and examined them carefully one after another.

I was too ignorant of the subject to be able to estimate the value of the vase or the antiquity of the vase, or even to know whether it were of British or of foreign manufacture. The ground was of a delicate cream-color. The ornaments traced on this were wreaths of flowers and Cupids surrounding a medallion on either side of the vase. Upon the space within one of the medallions was painted with exquisite delicacy a woman's head, representing a nymph or a goddess, or perhaps a portrait of some celebrated person--I was not learned enough to say which. The other medallion inclosed the head of a man, also treated in the classical style. Reclining shepherds and shepherdesses in Watteau costume, with their dogs and their sheep, formed the adornments of the pedestal. Such had the vase been in the days of its prosperity, when it stood on the top of the book-case. By what a accident had it become broken? And why had Major Fitz-David's face changed when he found that I had discovered the remains of his shattered work of art in the cabinet drawer?

The remains left those serious questions unanswered--the remains told me absolutely nothing. And yet, if my own observation of the Major were to be trusted, the way to the clew of which I was in search lay, directly or indirectly, through the broken vase.

It was useless to pursue the question, knowing no more than I knew now. I returned to the book-case.

Thus far I had assumed (without any sufficient reason) that the clew of which I was in search must necessarily reveal itself through a written paper of some sort. It now occurred to me--after the movement which I had detected on the part of the Major--that the clew might quite as probably present itself in the form of a book.

I looked along the lower rows of shelves, standing just near enough to them to read the titles on the backs of the volumes. I saw Voltaire in red morocco, Shakespeare in blue, Walter Scott in green, the "History of England" in brown, the "Annual Register" in yellow calf. There I paused, wearied and discouraged already by the long rows of volumes. How (I thought to myself) am I to examine all these books? And what am I to look for, even if I do examine them all?

Major Fitz-David had spoken of a terrible misfortune which had darkened my husband's past life. In what possible way could any trace of that misfortune, or any suggestive hint of something resembling it, exist in the archives of the "Annual Register" or in the pages of Voltaire? The bare idea of such a thing seemed absurd. The mere attempt to make a serious examination in this direction was surely a wanton waste of time.

And yet the Major had certainly stolen a look at the book-case. And again, the broken vase had once stood on the book-case. Did these circumstances justify me in connecting the vase and the book-case as twin landmarks on the way that led to discovery? The question was not an easy one to decide on the spur of the moment.

I looked up at the higher shelves.

Here the collection of books varied a greater variety. The volumes were smaller, and were not so carefully arranged as on the lower shelves. Some were bound in cloth, some were only protected by paper covers; one or two had fallen, and lay flat on the shelves. Here and there I saw empty spaces from which books had been removed and not replaced. In short, there was no discouraging uniformity in these higher regions of the book-case. The untidy top shelves looked suggestive of some lucky accident which might unexpectedly lead the way to success. I decided, if I did examine the book-case at all, to begin at the top.

Where was the library ladder?

I had left it against the partition wall which divided the back room from the room in front. Looking that way, I necessarily looked also toward the door that ran in grooves--the imperfectly closed door through which I heard Major Fitz-David question his servant on the subject of my personal appearance when I first entered the house. No one had moved this door during the time of my visit. Everybody entering or leaving the room had used the other door, which led into the hall.

At the moment when I looked round something stirred in the front room. The movement let the light in suddenly through the small open space left by the partially closed door. Had somebody been watching me through the chink? I stepped softly to the door, and pushed it back until it was wide open. There was the Major, discovered in the front room! I saw it in his face--he had been watching me at the book-case!

His hat was in his hand. He was evidently going out; and he dexterously took advantage of that circumstance to give a plausible reason for being so near the door.

"I hope I didn't frighten you," he said.

"You startled me a little, Major."

"I am so sorry, and so ashamed! I was just going to open the door, and tell you that I am obliged to go out. I have received a pressing message from a lady. A charming person--I should so like you to know her. She is in sad trouble, poor thing. Little bills, you know, and nasty tradespeople who want their money, and a husband--oh, dear me, a husband who is quite unworthy of her! A most interesting creature. You remind me of her a little; you both have the same carriage of the head. I shall not be more than half an hour gone. Can I do anything for you? You are looking fatigued. Pray let me send for some more champagne. No? Promise to ring when you want it. That's right! _Au revoir_, my charming friend--_au revoir!_"

I pulled the door to again the moment his back was turned, and sat down for a while to compose myself.

He had been watching me at the book-case! The man who was in my husband's confidence, the man who knew where the clew was to be found, had been watching me at the book-case! There was no doubt of it now. Major Fitz-David had shown me the hiding-place of the secret in spite of himself!

I looked with indifference at the other pieces of furniture, ranged against the fourth wall, which I had not examined yet. I surveyed, without the slightest feeling of curiosity, all the little elegant trifles scattered on the tables and on the chimney-piece, each one of which might have been an object of suspicion to me under other circumstances. Even the water-color drawings failed to interest me in my present frame of mind. I observed languidly that they were most of them portraits of ladies--fair idols, no doubt, of the Major's facile adoration--and I cared to notice no more. _My_ business in that room (I was certain of it now!) began and ended with the book-case. I left my seat to fetch the library ladder, determining to begin the work of investigation on the top shelves.

On my way to the ladder I passed one of the tables, and saw the keys lying on it which Major Fitz-David had left at my disposal.

The smaller of the two keys instantly reminded me of the cupboards under the bookcase. I had strangely overlooked these. A vague distrust of the locked doors a vague doubt of what they might be hiding from me, stole into my mind. I left the ladder in its place against the wall, and set myself to examine the contents of the cupboards first.

The cupboards were three in number. As I opened the first of them the singing upstairs ceased. For a moment there was something almost oppressive in the sudden change from noise to silence. I suppose my nerves must have been overwrought. The next sound in the house--nothing more remarkable than the creaking of a man's boots descending the stairs--made me shudder all over. The man was no doubt the singing-master, going away after giving his lesson. I heard the house door close on him, and started at the familiar sound as if it were something terrible which I had never heard before. Then there was silence again. I roused myself as well as I could, and began my examination of the first cupboard.

It was divided into two compartments.

The top compartment contained nothing but boxes of cigars, ranged in rows, one on another. The under compartment was devoted to a collection of shells. They were all huddled together anyhow, the Major evidently setting a far higher value on his cigars than on his shells. I searched this lower compartment carefully for any object interesting to me which might be hidden in it. Nothing was to be found in any part of it besides the shells.

As I opened the second cupboard it struck me that the light was beginning to fail.

I looked at the window: it was hardly evening yet. The darkening of the light was produced by gathering clouds. Rain-drops pattered against the glass; the autumn wind whistled mournfully in the corners of the courtyard. I mended the fire before I renewed my search. My nerves were in fault again, I suppose. I shivered when I went back to the book-case. My hands trembled: I wondered what was the matter with me.

The second cupboard revealed (in the upper division of it) some really beautiful cameos--not mounted, but laid on cotton-wool in neat cardboard trays. In one corner, half hidden under one of the trays, there peeped out the white leaves of a little manuscript. I pounced on it eagerly, only to meet with a new disappointment: the manuscript proved to be a descriptive catalogue of the cameos--nothing more!

Turning to the lower division of the cupboard, I found more costly curiosities in the shape of ivory carvings from Japan and specimens of rare silk from China. I began to feel weary of disinterring the Major's treasures. The longer I searched, the farther I seemed to remove myself from the one object that I had it at heart to attain. After closing the door of the second cupboard, I almost doubted whether it would be worth my while to proceed farther and open the third and last door.

A little reflection convinced me that it would be as well, now that I had begun my examination of the lower regions of the book-case, to go on with it to the end. I opened the last cupboard.

On the upper shelf there appeared, in solitary grandeur, one object only--a gorgeously bound book.

It was of a larger size than usual, judging of it by comparison with the dimensions of modern volumes. The binding was of blue velvet, with clasps of silver worked in beautiful arabesque patterns, and with a lock of the same precious metal to protect the book from prying eyes. When I took it up, I found that the lock was not closed.

Had I any right to take advantage of this accident, and open the book? I have put the question since to some of my friends of both sexes. The women all agree that I was perfectly justified, considering the serious interests that I had at stake, in taking any advantage of any book in the Major's house. The men differ from this view, and declare that I ought to have put back the volume in blue velvet unopened, carefully guarding myself from any after-temptation to look at it again by locking the cupboard door. I dare say the men are right.

Being a woman, however, I opened the book without a moment's hesitation.

The leaves were of the finest vellum, with tastefully designed illuminations all round them. And what did these highly ornamental pages contain? To my unutterable amazement and disgust, they contained locks of hair, let neatly into the center of each page, with inscriptions beneath, which proved them to be love-tokens from various ladies who had touched the Major's susceptible heart at different periods of his life. The inscriptions were written in other languages besides English, but they appeared to be all equally devoted to the same curious purpose, namely, to reminding the Major of the dates at which his various attachments had come to an untimely end. Thus the first page exhibited a lock of the lightest flaxen hair, with these lines beneath: "My adored Madeline. Eternal constancy. Alas, July 22, 1839!" The next page was adorned by a darker shade of hair, with a French inscription under it: "Clemence. Idole de mon cur. Toujours fidele. Helas, 2me Avril, 1840." A lock of red hair followed, with a lamentation in Latin under it, a note being attached to the date of dissolution of partnership in this case, stating that the lady was descended from the ancient Romans, and was therefore mourned appropriately in Latin by her devoted Fitz-David. More shades of hair and more inscriptions followed, until I was weary of looking at them. I put down the book, disgusted with the creatures who had assisted in filling it, and then took it up again, by an afterthought. Thus far I had thoroughly searched everything that had presented itself to my notice. Agreeable or not agreeable, it was plainly of serious importance to my own interests to go on as I had begun, and thoroughly to search the book.

I turned over the pages until I came to the first blank leaf. Seeing that they were all blank leaves from this place to the end, I lifted the volume by the back, and, as a last measure of precaution, shook it so as to dislodge any loose papers or cards which might have escaped my notice between the leaves.

This time my patience was rewarded by a discovery which indescribably irritated and distressed me.

A small photograph, mounted on a card, fell out of the book. A first glance showed me that it represented the portraits of two persons.

One of the persons I recognized as my husband.

The other person was a woman.

Her face was entirely unknown to me. She was not young. The picture represented her seated on a chair, with my husband standing behind, and bending over her, holding one of her hands in his. The woman's face was hard-featured and ugly, with the marking lines of strong passions and resolute self-will plainly written on it. Still, ugly as she was, I felt a pang of jealousy as I noticed the familiarly affectionate action by which the artist (with the permission of his sitters, of course) had connected the two figures in a group. Eustace had briefly told me, in the days of our courtship, that he had more than once fancied himself to be in love before he met with me. Could this very unattractive woman have been one of the early objects of his admiration? Had she been near enough and dear enough to him to be photographed with her hand in his? I looked and looked at the portraits until I could endure them no longer. Women are strange creatures--mysteries even to themselves. I threw the photograph from me into a corner of the cupboard. I was savagely angry with my husband; I hated--yes, hated with all my heart and soul!--the woman who had got his hand in hers--the unknown woman with the self-willed, hard-featured face.

All this time the lower shelf of the cupboard was still waiting to be looked over.

I knelt down to examine it, eager to clear my mind, if I could, of the degrading jealousy that had got possession of me.

Unfortunately, the lower shelf contained nothing but relics of the Major's military life, comprising his sword and pistols, his epaulets, his sash, and other minor accouterments. None of these objects excited the slightest interest in me. My eyes wandered back to the upper shelf; and, like the fool I was (there is no milder word that can fitly describe me at that moment), I took the photograph out again, and enraged myself uselessly by another look at it. This time I observed, what I had not noticed before, that there were some lines of writing (in a woman's hand) at the back of the portraits. The lines ran thus:

"To Major Fitz-David, with two vases. From his friends, S. and E. M."

Was one of those two vases the vase that had been broken? And was the change that I had noticed in Major Fitz-David's face produced by some past association in connection with it, which in some way affected me? It might or might not be so. I was little disposed to indulge in speculation on this topic while the far more serious question of the initials confronted me on the back of the photograph.

"S. and E. M.?" Those last two letters might stand for the initials of my husband's name--his true name--Eustace Macallan. In this case the first letter ("S.") in all probability indicated _her_ name. What right had she to associate herself with him in that manner? I considered a little--my memory exerted itself--I suddenly called to mind that Eustace had sisters. He had spoken of them more than once in the time before our marriage. Had I been mad enough to torture myself with jealousy of my husband's sister? It might well be so; "S." might stand for his sister's Christian name. I felt heartily ashamed of myself as this new view of the matter dawned on me. What a wrong I had done to them both in my thoughts! I turned the photograph, sadly and penitently, to examine the portraits again with a kinder and truer appreciation of them.

I naturally looked now for a family likeness between the two faces. There was no family likeness; on the contrary, they were as unlike each other in form and expression as faces could be. _Was_ she his sister, after all? I looked at her hands, as represented in the portrait. Her right hand was clasped by Eustace; her left hand lay on her lap. On the third finger, distinctly visible, there was a wedding-ring. Were any of my husband's sisters married? I had myself asked him the question when he mentioned them to me, and I perfectly remembered that he had replied in the negative.

Was it possible that my first jealous instinct had led me to the right conclusion after all? If it had, what did the association of the three initial letters mean? What did the wedding-ring mean? Good Heavens! was I looking at the portrait of a rival in my husband's affections--and was that rival his Wife?

I threw the photograph from me with a cry of horror. For one terrible moment I felt as if my reason was giving way. I don't know what would have happened, or what I should have done next, if my love for Eustace had not taken the uppermost place among the contending emotions that tortured me. That faithful love steadied my brain. That faithful love roused the reviving influences of my better and nobler sense. Was the man whom I had enshrined in my heart of hearts capable of such base wickedness as the bare idea of his marriage to another woman implied? No! Mine was the baseness, mine the wickedness, in having even for a moment thought it of him!

I picked up the detestable photograph from the floor, and put it back in the book. I hastily closed the cupboard door, fetched the library ladder, and set it against the book-case. My one idea now was the idea of taking refuge in employment of any sort from my own thoughts. I felt the hateful suspicion that had degraded me coming back again in spite of my efforts to repel it. The books! the books! my only hope was to absorb myself, body and soul, in the books.

I had one foot on the ladder, when I heard the door of the room open--the door which communicated with the hall.

I looked around, expecting to see the Major. I saw instead the Major's future prima donna standing just inside the door, with her round eyes steadily fixed on me.

"I can stand a good deal," the girl began, coolly, "but I can't stand _this_ any longer?"

"What is it that you can't stand any longer?" I asked.

"If you have been here a minute, you have been here two good hours," she went on. "All by yourself in the Major's study. I am of a jealous disposition--I am. And I want to know what it means." She advanced a few steps nearer to me, with a heightening color and a threatening look. "Is he going to bring _you_ out on the stage?" she asked, sharply.

"Certainly not."

"He ain't in love with you, is he?"

Under other circumstances I might have told her to leave the room. In my position at that critical moment the mere presence of a human creature was a positive relief to me. Even this girl, with her coarse questions and her uncultivated manners, was a welcome intruder on my solitude: she offered me a refuge from myself.

"Your question is not very civilly put," I said. "However, I excuse you. You are probably not aware that I am a married woman."

"What has that got to do with it?" she retorted. "Married or single, it's all one to the Major. That brazen-faced hussy who calls herself Lady Clarinda is married, and she sends him nosegays three times a week! Not that I care, mind you, about the old fool. But I've lost my situation at the railway, and I've got my own interests to look after, and I don't know what may happen if I let other women come between him and me. That's where the shoe pinches, don't you see? I'm not easy in my mind when I see him leaving you mistress here to do just what you like. No offense! I speak out--I do. I want to know what you are about all by yourself in this room? How did you pick up with the Major? I never heard him speak of you before to-day."

Under all the surface selfishness and coarseness of this strange girl there was a certain frankness and freedom which pleaded in her favor--to my mind, at any rate. I answered frankly and freely on my side.

"Major Fitz-David is an old friend of my husband's," I said, "and he is kind to me for my husband's sake. He has given me permission to look in this room--"

I stopped, at a loss how to describe my employment in terms which should tell her nothing, and which should at the same time successfully set her distrust of me at rest.

"To look about in this room--for what?" she asked. Her eye fell on the library ladder, beside which I was still standing. "For a book?" she resumed.

"Yes," I said, taking the hint. "For a book."

"Haven't you found it yet?"

"No."

She looked hard at me, undisguisedly considering with herself whether I were or were not speaking the truth.

"You seem to be a good sort," she said, making up her mind at last. "There's nothing stuck-up about you. I'll help you if I can. I have rummaged among the books here over and over again, and I know more about them than you do. What book do you want?"

As she put that awkward question she noticed for the first time Lady Clarinda's nosegay lying on the side-table where the Major had left it. Instantly forgetting me and my book, this curious girl pounced like a fury on the flowers, and actually trampled them under her feet!

"There!" she cried. "If I had Lady Clarinda here I'd serve her in the same way."

"What will the Major say?" I asked.

"What do I care? Do you suppose I'm afraid of _him?_ Only last week I broke one of his fine gimcracks up there, and all through Lady Clarinda and her flowers!"

She pointed to the top of the book-case--to the empty space on it close by the window. My heart gave a sudden bound as my eyes took the direction indicated by her finger. _She_ had broken the vase! Was the way to discovery about to reveal itself to me through this girl? Not a word would pass my lips; I could only look at her.

"Yes!" she said. "The thing stood there. He knows how I hate her flowers, and he put her nosegay in the vase out of my way. There was a woman's face painted on the china, and he told me it was the living image of _her_ face. It was no more like her than I am. I was in such a rage that I up with the book I was reading at the time and shied it at the painted face. Over the vase went, bless your heart, crash to the floor. Stop a bit! I wonder whether _that's_ the book you have been looking after? Are you like me? Do you like reading Trials?"

Trials? Had I heard her aright? Yes: she had said Trials.

I answered by an affirmative motion of my head. I was still speechless. The girl sauntered in her cool way to the fire-place, and, taking up the tongs, returned with them to the book-case.

"Here's where the book fell," she said--"in the space between the book-case and the wall. I'll have it out in no time."

I waited without moving a muscle, without uttering a word.

She approached me with the tongs in one hand and with a plainly bound volume in the other.

"Is that the book?" she said. "Open it, and see."

I took the book from her.

"It is tremendously interesting," she went on. "I've read it twice over--I have. Mind you, _I_ believe he did it, after all."

Did it? Did what? What was she talking about? I tried to put the question to her. I struggled--quite vainly--to say only these words: "What are you talking about?"

She seemed to lose all patience with me. She snatched the book out of my hand, and opened it before me on the table by which we were standing side by side.

"I declare, you're as helpless as a baby!" she said, contemptuously. "There! _Is_ that the book?"

I read the first lines on the title-page--

A COMPLETE REPORT OF THE TRIAL OF EUSTACE MACALLAN.

I stopped and looked up at her. She started back from me with a scream of terror. I looked down again at the title-page, and read the next lines--

FOR THE ALLEGED POISONING OF HIS WIFE.

There, God's mercy remembered me. There the black blank of a swoon swallowed me up.