

"The lady lives here," she said. "Knock loud, for mother says she's sick, and may be she's asleep."

He stood a moment after the slip-shod fairy had bounded away, then lifted his hand, and knocked heavily.

An instant, and the door was opened by a poorly dressed woman with a baby in her arms.

"Mrs. Bartram lives here?" he said, slowly.

"Yes, sir," the woman answered, "she's here. Will you walk in? She's poorly, and she's lying down, but she's awake."

He followed her in, his heart beating like a muffled drum. The twilight filled the room; a dull red fire glowed in the grate, diffusing heat, but little light. On a lounge, in front of this fire, wrapped in a large shawl, half buried amid pillows, lay a female figure—his wife!

"I'll step down-stairs, Mrs. Bartram," the woman said, "while you talk to the gentleman. Do you want the lamp lighted?"

"No," said a stifled voice from among the pillows. "there is light enough. I will knock on the floor when I want you, Mrs. Gray."

Estella's very voice! And after all these weary years, these commonplace words were the first he heard her speak.

The woman left the room and closed the door. Then, Mr. Bartram, standing motionless like some tall, black ghost, advanced and knelt down beside the lounge.

"Estella," he said, huskily, "after all these years—at last! And this is how I find you—poor, and ill, and alone. How shall I answer to God and man for the wrong I have done you?"

She covered her face with her hands. He could hear her sobbing; he could see the tears that fell like rain.

"Only forgive me!" she said, in the same stifled voice. "Do not altogether hate me for what I have done! Oh, Alwyn, I have suffered bitterly since we parted, but I thought that I must again stand between you and happiness—the thought that you may learn to hate me—has been the bitterest suffering of all."

"My poor little Essie!" He drew her hands from before her face and tried to see it. "Let me look at you—let me see once more the faithful, loving face—always so tender, so true. And you love me still, my poor little wife—I who have been the greatest villain on earth to you?"