

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 either 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 reproductions (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 pinushions, 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 and 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 cork-screw, 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, travelled downwards 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 clue.

## CHAPTER X.

### THE SEARCH.

"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 appear-

ance 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 over-acted.

"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 towards 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 bookcase 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 bookcase? 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 stood in the place now vacant on the top of the bookcase, 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 was of British or of foreign manufacture. The ground was of a delicate cream-colour. 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 enclosed 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 bookcase. By what 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 was to be trusted, the way to the clue 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 bookcase.

Thus far, I had assumed (without any sufficient reason) that the clue in 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 clue 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 back 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 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 bookcase. And again, the broken vase had once stood on the bookcase. Did these circumstances justify me in connecting the vase and the bookcase 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 exhibited 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 bookcase. 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 bookcase at all, to begin at the top.

Where was the library ladder?

I had left it against the partition wall which divided the back from the room in front. Looking that way, I necessarily looked also towards the door that ran in grooves—the imperfectly-closed door through which I had 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 bookcase.

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—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 bookcase! The man who was in my husband's confidence, the man who knew where the clue was to be found, had been watching me at the bookcase! 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-colour drawings failed to interest me, in my present state 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 bookcase. 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 over-wrought. 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 was 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 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 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 even ing 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 at fault again, I suppose. I shivered when I went back to the bookcase. 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 bookcase, 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 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 centre 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 than English, but they appeared to be all equally devoted to the same curious purposes, 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 light flaxen hair, with these lines beneath: "My adored Madeline. Eternal constancy. Alas, July 22nd, 1839!" The next page was adorned by a darker shade of hair, with a French inscription under it: "Clémence. Idole de mon âme. Toujours fidèle. Hélas, 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 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 no 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.