

Armada

by

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Armadale

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|---|-----|
| Prologue | 3 |
| I.1. The Mystery Of Ozias Midwinter | 35 |
| I.2. The Man Revealed | 62 |
| I.3. Day And Night | 78 |
| I.4. The Shadow Of The Past | 90 |
| I.5. The Shadow Of The Future | 103 |
| II.1. Lurking Mischief..... | 114 |
| II.2. Allan As A Landed Gentleman | 124 |
| II.3. The Claims Of Society | 135 |
| II.4. The March Of Events..... | 145 |
| II.5. Mother Oldershaw On Her Guard | 157 |
| II.6. Midwinter In Disguise | 165 |
| II.7. The Plot Thickens..... | 171 |
| II.8. The Norfolk Broads..... | 183 |
| II.9. Fate Or Chance? | 194 |
| II.10. The House-Maid's Face | 204 |
| II.11. Miss Gwilt Among The Quicksands..... | 215 |
| II.12. The Clouding Of The Sky | 223 |
| II.13. Exit..... | 228 |
| III.1. Mrs. Milroy | 236 |
| III.2. The Man Is Found | 244 |
| III.3. The Brink Of Discovery..... | 251 |
| III.4. Allan At Bay | 262 |
| III.5. Pedgift's Remedy..... | 274 |
| III.6. Pedgift's Postscript | 284 |
| III.7. The Martyrdom Of Miss Gwilt..... | 289 |
| III.8. She Comes Between Them..... | 301 |
| III.9. She Knows The Truth..... | 309 |
| III.10. Miss Gwilt's Diary | 326 |
| III.11. Love And Law | 349 |
| III.12. A Scandal At The Station | 356 |
| III.13. An Old Man's Heart | 362 |
| III.14. Miss Gwilt's Diary | 375 |
| III.15. The Wedding-Day..... | 398 |
| IV.1. Miss Gwilt's Diary | 419 |
| IV.2. The Diary Continued | 428 |
| IV.3. The Diary Broken Off | 444 |
| V.1. At The Terminus..... | 472 |
| V.2. In The House..... | 477 |
| V.3. The Purple Flask | 485 |
| Epilogue..... | 514 |
| Appendix..... | 520 |

Prologue

1. The Travelers

It was the opening of the season of eighteen hundred and thirty-two, at the Baths of Wildbad.

The evening shadows were beginning to gather over the quiet little German town, and the diligence was expected every minute. Before the door of the principal inn, waiting the arrival of the first visitors of the year, were assembled the three notable personages of Wildbad, accompanied by their wives--the mayor, representing the inhabitants; the doctor, representing the waters; the landlord, representing his own establishment. Beyond this select circle, grouped snugly about the trim little square in front of the inn, appeared the towns-people in general, mixed here and there with the country people, in their quaint German costume, placidly expectant of the diligence--the men in short black jackets, tight black breeches, and three-cornered beaver hats; the women with their long light hair hanging in one thickly plaited tail behind them, and the waists of their short woolen gowns inserted modestly in the region of their shoulder-blades. Round the outer edge of the assemblage thus formed, flying detachments of plump white-headed children careered in perpetual motion; while, mysteriously apart from the rest of the inhabitants, the musicians of the Baths stood collected in one lost corner, waiting the appearance of the first visitors to play the first tune of the season in the form of a serenade. The light of a May evening was still bright on the tops of the great wooded hills watching high over the town on the right hand and the left; and the cool breeze that comes before sunset came keenly fragrant here with the balsamic odor of the first of the Black Forest.

"Mr. Landlord," said the mayor's wife (giving the landlord his title), "have you any foreign guests coming on this first day of the season?"

"Madame Mayoress," replied the landlord (returning the compliment), "I have two. They have written--the one by the hand of his servant, the other by his own hand apparently--to order their rooms; and they are from England, both, as I think by their names. If you ask me to pronounce those names, my tongue hesitates; if you ask me to spell them, here they are, letter by letter, first and second in their order as they come. First, a high-born stranger (by title Mister) who introduces himself in eight letters, A, r, m, a, d, a, l, e--and comes ill in his own carriage. Second, a high-born stranger (by title Mister also), who introduces himself in four letters--N, e, a, l--and comes ill in the diligence. His excellency of the eight letters writes to me (by his servant) in French; his excellency of the four letters writes to me in German. The rooms of both are ready. I know no more."

"Perhaps," suggested the mayor's wife, "Mr. Doctor has heard from one or both of these illustrious strangers?"

"From one only, Madam Mayoress; but not, strictly speaking, from the person himself. I have received a medical report of his excellency of the eight letters, and his case seems a bad one. God help him!"

"The diligence!" cried a child from the outskirts of the crowd.

The musicians seized their instruments, and silence fell on the whole community. From far away in the windings of the forest gorge, the ring of horses' bells came faintly clear through the evening stillness. Which carriage was approaching--the private carriage with Mr. Armadale, or the public carriage with Mr. Neal?

"Play, my friends!" cried the mayor to the musicians. "Public or private, here are the first sick people of the season. Let them find us cheerful."

The band played a lively dance tune, and the children in the square footed it merrily to the music. At the same moment, their elders near the inn door drew aside, and disclosed the first shadow of gloom that fell over the gayety and beauty of the scene. Through the opening made on either hand, a little procession of stout country girls advanced, each drawing after her an empty chair on wheels; each in waiting (and knitting while she waited) for the paralyzed wretches who came helpless by hundreds then--who come helpless by thousands now--to the waters of Wildbad for relief.

While the band played, while the children danced, while the buzz of many talkers deepened, while the strong young nurses of the coming cripples knitted impenetrably, a woman's insatiable curiosity about other women asserted itself in the mayor's wife. She drew the landlady aside, and whispered a question to her on the spot.

"A word more, ma'am," said the mayor's wife, "about the two strangers from England. Are their letters explicit? Have they got any ladies with them?"

"The one by the diligence--no," replied the landlady. "But the one by the private carriage--yes. He comes with a child; he comes with a nurse; and," concluded the landlady, skillfully keeping the main point of interest till the last, "he comes with a Wife."

The mayoress brightened; the doctress (assisting at the conference) brightened; the landlady nodded significantly. In the minds of all three the same thought started into life at the same moment--"We shall see the Fashions! "

In a minute more, there was a sudden movement in the crowd; and a chorus of voices proclaimed that the travelers were at hand.

By this time the coming vehicle was in sight, and all further doubt was at an end. It was the diligence that now approached by the long street leading into the square--the diligence (in a dazzling new coat of yellow paint) that delivered the first visitors of the season at the inn door. Of the ten travelers released from the middle compartment and the back compartment of the carriage--all from various parts of Germany--three were lifted out helpless, and were placed in the chairs on wheels to be drawn to their lodgings in the town. The front compartment contained two passengers only--Mr. Neal and his traveling servant. With an arm on either side to assist him, the stranger (whose malady appeared to be locally confined to a lameness in one of his feet) succeeded in descending the steps of the carriage easily enough. While he steadied himself on the pavement by the help of his stick--looking not over-patiently toward the musicians who were serenading him with the waltz in "Der Freischutz"--his personal appearance rather damped the enthusiasm of the friendly little circle assembled to welcome him. He was a lean, tall, serious, middle-aged man, with a cold gray eye and a long upper lip,

with overhanging eyebrows and high cheek-bones; a man who looked what he was--every inch a Scotchman.

"Where is the proprietor of this hotel?" he asked, speaking in the German language, with a fluent readiness of expression, and an icy coldness of manner. "Fetch the doctor," he continued, when the landlord had presented himself, "I want to see him immediately."

"I am here already, sir," said the doctor, advancing from the circle of friends, "and my services are entirely at your disposal."

"Thank you," said Mr. Neal, looking at the doctor, as the rest of us look at a dog when we have whistled and the dog has come. "I shall be glad to consult you to-morrow morning, at ten o'clock, about my own case. I only want to trouble you now with a message which I have undertaken to deliver. We overtook a traveling carriage on the road here with a gentleman in it--an Englishman, I believe--who appeared to be seriously ill. A lady who was with him begged me to see you immediately on my arrival, and to secure your professional assistance in removing the patient from the carriage. Their courier has met with an accident, and has been left behind on the road, and they are obliged to travel very slowly. If you are here in an hour, you will be here in time to receive them. That is the message. Who is this gentleman who appears to be anxious to speak to me? The mayor? If you wish to see my passport, sir, my servant will show it to you. No? You wish to welcome me to the place, and to offer your services? I am infinitely flattered. If you have any authority to shorten the performances of your town band, you would be doing me a kindness to exert it. My nerves are irritable, and I dislike music. Where is the landlord? No; I want to see my rooms. I don't want your arm; I can get upstairs with the help of my stick. Mr. Mayor and Mr. Doctor, we need not detain one another any longer. I wish you good-night."

Both mayor and doctor looked after the Scotchman as he limped upstairs, and shook their heads together in mute disapproval of him. The ladies, as usual, went a step further, and expressed their opinions openly in the plainest words. The case under consideration (so far as they were concerned) was the scandalous case of a man who had passed them over entirely without notice. Mrs. Mayor could only attribute such an outrage to the native ferocity of a savage. Mrs. Doctor took a stronger view still, and considered it as proceeding from the inbred brutality of a hog.

The hour of waiting for the traveling-carriage wore on, and the creeping night stole up the hillsides softly. One by one the stars appeared, and the first lights twinkled in the windows of the inn. As the darkness came, the last idlers deserted the square; as the darkness came, the mighty silence of the forest above flowed in on the valley, and strangely and suddenly hushed the lonely little town.

The hour of waiting wore out, and the figure of the doctor, walking backward and forward anxiously, was still the only living figure left in the square. Five minutes, ten minutes, twenty minutes, were counted out by the doctor's watch, before the first sound came through the night silence to warn him of the approaching carriage. Slowly it emerged into the square, at the walking pace of the horses, and drew up, as a hearse might have drawn up, at the door of the inn.

"Is the doctor here?" asked a woman's voice, speaking, out of the darkness of the carriage, in the French language.

"I am here, madam," replied the doctor, taking a light from the landlord's hand and opening the carriage door.

The first face that the light fell on was the face of the lady who had just spoken--a young, darkly beautiful woman, with the tears standing thick and bright in her eager black eyes. The second face revealed was the face of a shriveled old negress, sitting opposite the lady on the back seat. The third was the face of a little sleeping child in the negress's lap. With a quick gesture of impatience, the lady signed to the nurse to leave the carriage first with the child. "Pray take them out of the way," she said to the landlady; "pray take them to their room." She got out herself when her request had been complied with. Then the light fell clear for the first time on the further side of the carriage, and the fourth traveler was disclosed to view.

He lay helpless on a mattress, supported by a stretcher; his hair, long and disordered, under a black skull-cap; his eyes wide open, rolling to and fro ceaselessly anxious; the rest of his face as void of all expression of the character within him, and the thought within him, as if he had been dead. There was no looking at him now, and guessing what he might once have been. The leaden blank of his face met every question as to his age, his rank, his temper, and his looks which that face might once have answered, in impenetrable silence. Nothing spoke for him now but the shock that had struck him with the death-in-life of paralysis. The doctor's eye questioned his lower limbs, and Death-in-Life answered, I am here. The doctor's eye, rising attentively by way of his hands and arms, questioned upward and upward to the muscles round his mouth, and Death-in-Life answered, I am coming.

In the face of a calamity so unsparing and so dreadful, there was nothing to be said. The silent sympathy of help was all that could be offered to the woman who stood weeping at the carriage door.

As they bore him on his bed across the hall of the hotel, his wandering eyes encountered the face of his wife. They rested on her for a moment, and in that moment he spoke.

"The child?" he said in English, with a slow, thick, laboring articulation.

"The child is safe upstairs," she answered, faintly.

"My desk?"

"It is in my hands. Look! I won't trust it to anybody; I am taking care of it for you myself."

He closed his eyes for the first time after that answer, and said no more. Tenderly and skillfully he was carried up the stairs, with his wife on one side of him, and the doctor (ominously silent) on the other. The landlord and the servants following saw the door of his room open and close on him; heard the lady burst out crying hysterically as soon as she was alone with the doctor and the sick man; saw the doctor come out, half an hour later, with his ruddy face a shade paler than usual; pressed him eagerly for information, and received but one answer to all their inquiries--"Wait till I have seen him to-morrow. Ask me nothing to-night."

They all knew the doctor's ways, and they augured ill when he left them hurriedly with that reply.

So the two first English visitors of the year came to the Baths of Wildbad in the season of eighteen hundred and thirty-two.

2. The Solid Side Of The Scotch Character

AT ten o'clock the next morning, Mr. Neal--waiting for the medical visit which he had himself appointed for that hour--looked at his watch, and discovered, to his amazement, that he was waiting in vain. It was close on eleven when the door opened at last, and the doctor entered the room.

"I appointed ten o'clock for your visit," said Mr. Neal. "In my country, a medical man is a punctual man."

"In my country," returned the doctor, without the least ill-humor, "a medical man is exactly like other men--he is at the mercy of accidents. Pray grant me your pardon, sir, for being so long after my time; I have been detained by a very distressing case--the case of Mr. Armadale, whose traveling-carriage you passed on the road yesterday."

Mr. Neal looked at his medical attendant with a sour surprise. There was a latent anxiety in the doctor's eye, a latent preoccupation in the doctor's manner, which he was at a loss to account for. For a moment the two faces confronted each other silently, in marked national contrast--the Scotchman's, long and lean, hard and regular; the German's, plump and florid, soft and shapeless. One face looked as if it had never been young; the other, as if it would never grow old.

"Might I venture to remind you," said Mr. Neal, "that the case now under consideration is MY case, and not Mr. Armadale's?"

"Certainly," replied the doctor, still vacillating between the case he had come to see and the case he had just left. "You appear to be suffering from lameness; let me look at your foot."

Mr. Neal's malady, however serious it might be in his own estimation, was of no extraordinary importance in a medical point of view. He was suffering from a rheumatic affection of the ankle-joint. The necessary questions were asked and answered and the necessary baths were prescribed. In ten minutes the consultation was at an end, and the patient was waiting in significant silence for the medical adviser to take his leave.

"I cannot conceal from myself," said the doctor, rising, and hesitating a little, "that I am intruding on you. But I am compelled to beg your indulgence if I return to the subject of Mr. Armadale."

"May I ask what compels you?"

"The duty which I owe as a Christian," answered the doctor, "to a dying man."

Mr. Neal started. Those who touched his sense of religious duty touched the quickest sense in his nature.

"You have established your claim on my attention," he said, gravely. "My time is yours."

"I will not abuse your kindness," replied the doctor, resuming his chair. "I will be as short as I can. Mr. Armadale's case is briefly this: He has passed the greater part of his life in the West Indies--a wild life, and a vicious life, by his own confession. Shortly after his marriage--now some three years since--the first

symptoms of an approaching paralytic affection began to show themselves, and his medical advisers ordered him away to try the climate of Europe. Since leaving the West Indies he has lived principally in Italy, with no benefit to his health. From Italy, before the last seizure attacked him, he removed to Switzerland, and from Switzerland he has been sent to this place. So much I know from his doctor's report; the rest I can tell you from my own personal experience. Mr. Armadale has been sent to Wildbad too late: he is virtually a dead man. The paralysis is fast spreading upward, and disease of the lower part of the spine has already taken place. He can still move his hands a little, but he can hold nothing in his fingers. He can still articulate, but he may wake speechless to-morrow or next day. If I give him a week more to live, I give him what I honestly believe to be the utmost length of his span. At his own request I told him, as carefully and as tenderly as I could, what I have just told you. The result was very distressing; the violence of the patient's agitation was a violence which I despair of describing to you. I took the liberty of asking him whether his affairs were unsettled. Nothing of the sort. His will is in the hands of his executor in London, and he leaves his wife and child well provided for. My next question succeeded better; it hit the mark: 'Have you something on your mind to do before you die which is not done yet?' He gave a great gasp of relief, which said, as no words could have said it, Yes. 'Can I help you?' 'Yes. I have something to write that I must write; can you make me hold a pen?'

"He might as well have asked me if I could perform a miracle. I could only say No. 'If I dictate the words,' he went on, 'can you write what I tell you to write?' Once more I could only say No I understand a little English, but I can neither speak it nor write it. Mr. Armadale understands French when it is spoken (as I speak it to him) slowly, but he cannot express himself in that language; and of German he is totally ignorant. In this difficulty, I said, what any one else in my situation would have said: 'Why ask me? there is Mrs. Armadale at your service in the next room.' Before I could get up from my chair to fetch her, he stopped me--not by words, but by a look of horror which fixed me, by main force of astonishment, in my place. 'Surely,' I said, 'your wife is the fittest person to write for you as you desire?' 'The last person under heaven!' he answered. 'What!' I said, 'you ask me, a foreigner and a stranger, to write words at your dictation which you keep a secret from your wife!' Conceive my astonishment when he answered me, without a moment's hesitation, 'Yes!' I sat lost; I sat silent. 'If you can't write English,' he said, 'find somebody who can.' I tried to remonstrate. He burst into a dreadful moaning cry--a dumb entreaty, like the entreaty of a dog. 'Hush! hush!' I said, 'I will find somebody.' 'To-day!' he broke out, 'before my speech fails me, like my hand.' 'To-day, in an hour's time.' He shut his eyes; he quieted himself instantly. 'While I am waiting for you,' he said, 'let me see my little boy.' He had shown no tenderness when he spoke of his wife, but I saw the tears on his cheeks when he asked for his child. My profession, sir, has not made me so hard a man as you might think; and my doctor's heart was as heavy, when I went out to fetch the child, as if I had not been a doctor at all. I am afraid you think this rather weak on my part?"

The doctor looked appealingly at Mr. Neal. He might as well have looked at a rock in the Black Forest. Mr. Neal entirely declined to be drawn by any doctor in Christendom out of the regions of plain fact.

"Go on," he said. "I presume you have not told me all that you have to tell me, yet?"

"Surely you understand my object in coming here, now?" returned the other

"Your object is plain enough, at last. You invite me to connect myself blindfold with a matter which is in the last degree suspicious, so far. I decline giving you any answer until I know more than I know now. Did you think it necessary to inform this man's wife of what had passed between you, and to ask her for an explanation?"

"Of course I thought it necessary!" said the doctor, indignant at the reflection on his humanity which the question seemed to imply. "If ever I saw a woman fond of her husband, and sorry for her husband, it is this unhappy Mrs. Armadale. As soon as we were left alone together, I sat down by her side, and I took her hand in mine. Why not? I am an ugly old man, and I may allow myself such liberties as these!"

"Excuse me," said the impenetrable Scotchman. "I beg to suggest that you are losing the thread of the narrative."

"Nothing more likely," returned the doctor, recovering his good humor. "It is in the habit of my nation to be perpetually losing the thread; and it is evidently in the habit of yours, sir, to be perpetually finding it. What an example here of the order of the universe, and the everlasting fitness of things!"

"Will you oblige me, once for all, by confining yourself to the facts," persisted Mr. Neal, frowning impatiently. "May I inquire, for my own information, whether Mrs. Armadale could tell you what it is her husband wishes me to write, and why it is that he refuses to let her write for him?"

"There is my thread found--and thank you for finding it!" said the doctor. "You shall hear what Mrs. Armadale had to tell me, in Mrs. Armadale's own words. 'The cause that now shuts me out of his confidence,' she said, 'is, I firmly believe, the same cause that has always shut me out of his heart. I am the wife he has wedded, but I am not the woman he loves. I knew when he married me that another man had won from him the woman he loved. I thought I could make him forget her. I hoped when I married him; I hoped again when I bore him a son. Need I tell you the end of my hopes--you have seen it for yourself.' (Wait, sir, I entreat you! I have not lost the thread again; I am following it inch by inch.) 'Is this all you know?' I asked. 'All I knew,' she said, 'till a short time since. It was when we were in Switzerland, and when his illness was nearly at its worst, that news came to him by accident of that other woman who has been the shadow and the poison of my life--news that she (like me) had borne her husband a son. On the instant of his making that discovery--a trifling discovery, if ever there was one yet--a mortal fear seized on him: not for me, not for himself; a fear for his own child. The same day (without a word to me) he sent for the doctor. I was mean, wicked, what you please--I listened at the door. I heard him say: I have something to tell my son, when my son grows old enough to understand me. Shall I live to tell it? The doctor would say nothing certain. The same night (still without a word

to me) he locked himself into his room. What would any woman, treated as I was, have done in my place? She would have done as I did--she would have listened again. I heard him say to himself: I shall not live to tell it: I must; write it before I die. I heard his pen scrape, scrape, scrape over the paper; I heard him groaning and sobbing as he wrote; I implored him for God's sake to let me in. The cruel pen went scrape, scrape, scrape; the cruel pen was all the answer he gave me. I waited at the door--hours--I don't know how long. On a sudden, the pen stopped; and I heard no more. I whispered through the keyhole softly; I said I was cold and weary with waiting; I said, Oh, my love, let me in! Not even the cruel pen answered me now: silence answered me. With all the strength of my miserable hands I beat at the door. The servants came up and broke it in. We were too late; the harm was done. Over that fatal letter, the stroke had struck him--over that fatal letter, we found him paralyzed as you see him now. Those words which he wants you to write are the words he would have written himself if the stroke had spared him till the morning. From that time to this there has been a blank place left in the letter; and it is that blank place which he has just asked you to fill up!--In those words Mrs. Armadale spoke to me; in those words you have the sum and substance of all the information I can give. Say, if you please, sir, have I kept the thread at last? Have I shown you the necessity which brings me here from your countryman's death-bed?"

"Thus far," said Mr. Neal, "you merely show me that you are exciting yourself. This is too serious a matter to be treated as you are treating it now. You have involved Me in the business, and I insist on seeing my way plainly. Don't raise your hands; your hands are not a part of the question. If I am to be concerned in the completion of this mysterious letter, it is only an act of justifiable prudence on my part to inquire what the letter is about. Mrs. Armadale appears to have favored you with an infinite number of domestic particulars--in return, I presume, for your polite attention in taking her by the hand. May I ask what she could tell you about her husband's letter, so far as her husband has written it?"

"Mrs. Armadale could tell me nothing," replied the doctor, with a sudden formality in his manner, which showed that his forbearance was at last failing him. "Before she was composed enough to think of the letter, her husband had asked for it, and had caused it to be locked up in his desk. She knows that he has since, time after time, tried to finish it, and that, time after time, the pen has dropped from his fingers. She knows, when all other hope of his restoration was at an end, that his medical advisers encouraged him to hope in the famous waters of this place. And last, she knows how that hope has ended; for she knows what I told her husband this morning."

The frown which had been gathering latterly on Mr. Neal's face deepened and darkened. He looked at the doctor as if the doctor had personally offended him.

"The more I think of the position you are asking me to take," he said, "the less I like it. Can you undertake to say positively that Mr. Armadale is in his right mind?"

"Yes; as positively as words can say it."

"Does his wife sanction your coming here to request my interference?"

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