

Wilkie Collins

# The Dead Secret





# BOOK I

## CHAPTER I.

### THE TWENTY-THIRD OF AUGUST, 1829.

“Will she last out the night, I wonder?”

“Look at the clock, Mathew.”

“Ten minutes past twelve! She *HAS* lasted the night out. She has lived, Robert, to see ten minutes of the new day.”

These words were spoken in the kitchen of a large country-house situated on the west coast of Cornwall. The speakers were two of the men-servants composing the establishment of Captain Treverton, an officer in the navy, and the eldest male representative of an old Cornish family. Both the servants communicated with each other restrainedly, in whispers—sitting close together, and looking round expectantly toward the door whenever the talk flagged between them.

“It’s an awful thing,” said the elder of the men, “for us two to be alone here, at this dark time, counting out the minutes that our mistress has left to live!”

“Robert,” said the other, “you have been in the service here since you were a boy—did you ever hear that our mistress was a play-actress when our master married her?”

“How came you to know that?” inquired the elder servant, sharply.

“Hush!” cried the other, rising quickly from his chair.

A bell rang in the passage outside.

“Is that for one of us?” asked Mathew.

“Can’t you tell, by the sound, which is which of those bells yet?” exclaimed Robert, contemptuously. “That bell is for Sarah Leeson. Go out into the passage and look.”

The younger servant took a candle and obeyed. When he opened the kitchen-door, a long row of bells met his eye on the wall opposite. Above each of them was painted, in neat black letters, the distinguishing title of the servant whom it was specially intended to summon. The row of letters began with Housekeeper and Butler, and ended with Kitchen-maid and Footman’s Boy.

Looking along the bells, Mathew easily discovered that one of them was still in motion. Above it were the words Lady’s-Maid. Observing this, he passed quickly along the passage, and knocked at an old-fashioned oak door at the end of it. No answer being given, he opened the door and looked into the room. It was dark and empty.

“Sarah is not in the housekeeper’s room,” said Mathew, returning to his fellow-servant in the kitchen.

“She is gone to her own room, then,” rejoined the other. “Go up and tell her that she is wanted by her mistress.”

The bell rang again as Mathew went out.

“Quick!—quick!” cried Robert. “Tell her she is wanted directly. Wanted,” he continued to himself in lower tones, “perhaps for the last time!”

Mathew ascended three flights of stairs—passed half-way down a long arched gallery—and knocked at another old-fashioned oak door. This time the signal was answered. A low, clear, sweet voice, inside the room, inquired who was waiting without? In a few hasty words Mathew told his errand. Before he had done speaking the door was quietly and quickly opened, and Sarah Leeson confronted him on the threshold, with her candle in her hand.

Not tall, not handsome, not in her first youth—shy and irresolute in manner—simple in dress to the utmost limits

of plainness—the lady’s-maid, in spite of all these disadvantages, was a woman whom it was impossible to look at without a feeling of curiosity, if not of interest. Few men, at first sight of her, could have resisted the desire to find out who she was; few would have been satisfied with receiving for answer, She is Mrs. Treverton’s maid; few would have refrained from the attempt to extract some secret information for themselves from her face and manner; and none, not even the most patient and practiced of observers, could have succeeded in discovering more than that she must have passed through the ordeal of some great suffering at some former period of her life. Much in her manner, and more in her face, said plainly and sadly: I am the wreck of something that you might once have liked to see; a wreck that can never be repaired—that must drift on through life unnoticed, unguided, unpitied—drift till the fatal shore is touched, and the waves of Time have swallowed up these broken relics of me forever. This was the story that was told in Sarah Leeson’s face—this, and no more.

No two men interpreting that story for themselves, would probably have agreed on the nature of the suffering which this woman had undergone. It was hard to say, at the outset, whether the past pain that had set its ineffaceable mark on her had been pain of the body or pain of the mind. But whatever the nature of the affliction she had suffered, the traces it had left were deeply and strikingly visible in every part of her face.

Her cheeks had lost their roundness and their natural color; her lips, singularly flexible in movement and delicate in form, had faded to an unhealthy paleness; her eyes, large and black and overshadowed by unusually thick lashes, had contracted an anxious startled look, which never left them, and which pitiously expressed the painful acuteness of her sensibility, the inherent timidity of her disposition. So far, the marks which sorrow or sickness had set on her were the marks common to

most victims of mental or physical suffering. The one extraordinary personal deterioration which she had undergone consisted in the unnatural change that had passed over the color of her hair. It was as thick and soft, it grew as gracefully, as the hair of a young girl; but it was as gray as the hair of an old woman. It seemed to contradict, in the most startling manner, every personal assertion of youth that still existed in her face. With all its haggardness and paleness, no one could have looked at it and supposed for a moment that it was the face of an elderly woman. Wan as they might be, there was not a wrinkle in her cheeks. Her eyes, viewed apart from their prevailing expression of uneasiness and timidity, still preserved that bright, clear moisture which is never seen in the eyes of the old. The skin about her temples was as delicately smooth as the skin of a child. These and other physical signs which never mislead, showed that she was still, as to years, in the very prime of her life. Sickly and sorrow-stricken as she was, she looked, from the eyes downward, a woman who had barely reached thirty years of age. From the eyes upward, the effect of her abundant gray hair, seen in connection with her face, was not simply incongruous—it was absolutely startling; so startling as to make it no paradox to say that she would have looked most natural, most like herself, if her hair had been dyed. In her case, Art would have seemed to be the truth, because Nature looked like falsehood.

What shock had stricken her hair, in the very maturity of its luxuriance, with the hue of an unnatural old age? Was it a serious illness, or a dreadful grief, that had turned her gray in the prime of her womanhood? That question had often been agitated among her fellow-servants, who were all struck by the peculiarities of her personal appearance, and rendered a little suspicious of her, as well, by an inveterate habit that she had of talking to herself. Inquire as they might, however, their curiosity was always baffled. Nothing more could be dis-

covered than that Sarah Leeson was, in the common phrase, touchy on the subject of her gray hair and her habit of talking to herself, and that Sarah Leeson's mistress had long since forbidden every one, from her husband downward, to ruffle her maid's tranquillity by inquisitive questions.

She stood for an instant speechless, on that momentous morning of the twenty-third of August, before the servant who summoned her to her mistress's death-bed—the light of the candle flaring brightly over her large, startled, black eyes, and the luxuriant, unnatural gray hair above them. She stood a moment silent—her hand trembling while she held the candlestick, so that the extinguisher lying loose in it rattled incessantly—then thanked the servant for calling her. The trouble and fear in her voice, as she spoke, seemed to add to its sweetness; the agitation of her manner took nothing away from its habitual gentleness, its delicate, winning, feminine restraint. Mathew, who, like the other servants, secretly distrusted and disliked her for differing from the ordinary pattern of professed lady's-maids, was, on this particular occasion, so subdued by her manner and her tone as she thanked him, that he offered to carry her candle for her to the door of her mistress's bed-chamber. She shook her head, and thanked him again, then passed before him quickly on her way out of the gallery.

The room in which Mrs. Treverton lay dying was on the floor beneath. Sarah hesitated twice before she knocked at the door. It was opened by Captain Treverton.

The instant she saw her master she started back from him. If she had dreaded a blow she could hardly have drawn away more suddenly, or with an expression of greater alarm. There was nothing in Captain Treverton's face to warrant the suspicion of ill-treatment, or even of harsh words. His countenance was kind, hearty, and open; and the tears were still trickling down it which he had shed by his wife's bedside.

“Go in,” he said, turning away his face. “She does not wish the nurse to attend; she only wishes for you. Call me if the doctor—” His voice faltered, and he hurried away without attempting to finish the sentence.

Sarah Leeson, instead of entering her mistress’s room, stood looking after her master attentively, with her pale cheeks turned to a deathly whiteness—with an eager, doubting, questioning terror in her eyes. When he had disappeared round the corner of the gallery, she listened for a moment outside the door of the sick-room—whispered affrightedly to herself, “Can she have told him?”—then opened the door, with a visible effort to recover her self-control; and, after lingering suspiciously on the threshold for a moment, went in.

Mrs. Treverton’s bed-chamber was a large, lofty room, situated in the western front of the house, and consequently overlooking the sea-view. The night-light burning by the bedside displayed rather than dispelled the darkness in the corners of the room. The bed was of the old-fashioned pattern, with heavy hangings and thick curtains drawn all round it. Of the other objects in the chamber, only those of the largest and most solid kind were prominent enough to be tolerably visible in the dim light. The cabinets, the wardrobe, the full-length looking-glass, the high-backed arm-chair, these, with the great shapeless bulk of the bed itself, towered up heavily and gloomily into view. Other objects were all merged together in the general obscurity. Through the open window, opened to admit the fresh air of the new morning after the sultriness of the August night, there poured monotonously into the room the dull, still, distant roaring of the surf on the sandy coast. All outer noises were hushed at that first dark hour of the new day. Inside the room the one audible sound was the slow, toilsome breathing of the dying woman, raising itself in its mortal frailness, awfully and

distinctly, even through the far thunder-breathing from the bosom of the everlasting sea.

“Mistress,” said Sarah Leeson, standing close to the curtains, but not withdrawing them, “my master has left the room, and has sent me here in his place.”

“Light!—give me more light.”

The feebleness of mortal sickness was in the voice; but the accent of the speaker sounded resolute even yet—doubly resolute by contrast with the hesitation of the tones in which Sarah had spoken. The strong nature of the mistress and the weak nature of the maid came out, even in that short interchange of words spoken through the curtain of a death-bed.

Sarah lit two candles with a wavering hand—placed them hesitatingly on a table by the bedside—waited for a moment, looking all round her with suspicious timidity—then undrew the curtains.

The disease of which Mrs. Treverton was dying was one of the most terrible of all the maladies that afflict humanity, one to which women are especially subject, and one which undermines life without, in most cases, showing any remarkable traces of its corroding progress in the face. No uninstructed person, looking at Mrs. Treverton when her attendant undrew the bed-curtain, could possibly have imagined that she was past all help that mortal skill could offer to her. The slight marks of illness in her face, the inevitable changes in the grace and roundness of its outline, were rendered hardly noticeable by the marvelous preservation of her complexion in all the light and delicacy of its first girlish beauty. There lay her face on the pillow—tenderly framed in by the rich lace of her cap, softly crowned by her shining brown hair—to all outward appearance, the face of a beautiful woman recovering from a slight illness, or reposing after unusual fatigue. Even Sarah Leeson, who had watched her all through her malady, could hardly believe, as she looked at her mistress,

that the Gates of Life had closed behind her, and that the beckoning hand of Death was signing to her already from the Gates of the Grave.

Some dog's-eared books in paper covers lay on the counterpane of the bed. As soon as the curtain was drawn aside Mrs. Treverton ordered her attendant by a gesture to remove them. They were plays, underscored in certain places by ink lines, and marked with marginal annotations referring to entrances, exits, and places on the stage. The servants, talking down stairs of their mistress's occupation before her marriage, had not been misled by false reports. Their master, after he had passed the prime of life, had, in very truth, taken his wife from the obscure stage of a country theatre, when little more than two years had elapsed since her first appearance in public. The dog's-eared old plays had been once her treasured dramatic library; she had always retained a fondness for them from old associations; and, during the latter part of her illness, they had remained on her bed for days and days together.

Having put away the plays, Sarah went back to her mistress; and, with more of dread and bewilderment in her face than grief, opened her lips to speak. Mrs. Treverton held up her hand, as a sign that she had another order to give.

"Bolt the door," she said, in the same enfeebled voice, but with the same accent of resolution which had so strikingly marked her first request to have more light in the room. "Bolt the door. Let no one in, till I give you leave."

"No one?" repeated Sarah, faintly. "Not the doctor? not even my master?"

"Not the doctor—not even your master," said Mrs. Treverton, and pointed to the door. The hand was weak; but even in that momentary action of it there was no mistaking the gesture of command.

Sarah bolted the door, returned irresolutely to the bedside, fixed her large, eager, startled eyes inquiringly on her

mistress's face, and, suddenly bending over her, said in a whisper:

"Have you told my master?"

"No," was the answer. "I sent for him, to tell him—I tried hard to speak the words—it shook me to my very soul, only to think how I should best break it to him—I am so fond of him! I love him so dearly! But I should have spoken in spite of that, if he had not talked of the child. Sarah! he did nothing but talk of the child—and that silenced me."

Sarah, with a forgetfulness of her station which might have appeared extraordinary even in the eyes of the most lenient of mistresses, flung herself back in a chair when the first word of Mrs. Treverton's reply was uttered, clasped her trembling hands over her face, and groaned to herself, "Oh, what will happen! what will happen now!"

Mrs. Treverton's eyes had softened and moistened when she spoke of her love for her husband. She lay silent for a few minutes; the working of some strong emotion in her being expressed by her quick, hard, labored breathing, and by the painful contraction of her eyebrows. Ere long, she turned her head uneasily toward the chair in which her attendant was sitting, and spoke again—this time in a voice which had sunk to a whisper.

"Look for my medicine," said she; "I want it."

Sarah started up, and with the quick instinct of obedience brushed away the tears that were rolling fast over her cheeks.

"The doctor," she said. "Let me call the doctor."

"No! The medicine—look for the medicine."

"Which bottle? The opiate—"

"No. Not the opiate. The other."

Sarah took a bottle from the table, and looking attentively at the written direction on the label, said that it was not yet time to take that medicine again.

"Give me the bottle."

“Oh, pray don’t ask me. Pray wait. The doctor said it was as bad as dram-drinking, if you took too much.”

Mrs. Treverton’s clear gray eyes began to flash; the rosy flush deepened on her cheeks; the commanding hand was raised again, by an effort, from the counterpane on which it lay.

“Take the cork out of the bottle,” she said, “and give it to me. I want strength. No matter whether I die in an hour’s time or a week’s. Give me the bottle.”

“No, no—not the bottle!” said Sarah, giving it up, nevertheless, under the influence of her mistress’s look. “There are two doses left. Wait, pray wait till I get a glass.”

She turned again toward the table. At the same instant Mrs. Treverton raised the bottle to her lips, drained it of its contents, and flung it from her on the bed.

“She has killed herself!” cried Sarah, running in terror to the door.

“Stop!” said the voice from the bed, more resolute than ever, already. “Stop! Come back and prop me up higher on the pillows.”

Sarah put her hand on the bolt.

“Come back!” reiterated Mrs. Treverton. “While there is life in me, I will be obeyed. Come back!” The color began to deepen perceptibly all over her face, and the light to grow brighter in her widely opened eyes.

Sarah came back; and with shaking hands added one more to the many pillows which supported the dying woman’s head and shoulders. While this was being done the bed-clothes became a little discomposed. Mrs. Treverton shuddered, and drew them up to their former position, close round her neck.

“Did you unbolt the door?” she asked.

“No.”

“I forbid you to go near it again. Get my writing-case, and the pen and ink, from the cabinet near the window.”

Sarah went to the cabinet and opened it; then stopped, as if some sudden suspicion had crossed her mind, and asked what the writing materials were wanted for.

“Bring them, and you will see.”

The writing-case, with a sheet of note-paper on it, was placed upon Mrs. Treverton’s knees; the pen was dipped into the ink, and given to her; she paused, closed her eyes for a minute, and sighed heavily; then began to write, saying to her waiting-maid, as the pen touched the paper—“Look.”

Sarah peered anxiously over her shoulder, and saw the pen slowly and feebly form these three words: *To my Husband*.

“Oh, no! no! For God’s sake, don’t write it!” she cried, catching at her mistress’s hand—but suddenly letting it go again the moment Mrs. Treverton looked at her.

The pen went on; and more slowly, more feebly, formed words enough to fill a line—then stopped. The letters of the last syllable were all blotted together.

“Don’t!” reiterated Sarah, dropping on her knees at the bedside. “Don’t write it to him if you can’t tell it to him. Let me go on bearing what I have borne so long already. Let the Secret die with you and die with me, and be never known in this world—never, never, never!”

“The Secret must be told,” answered Mrs. Treverton. “My husband ought to know it, and must know it. I tried to tell him, and my courage failed me. I can not trust you to tell him, after I am gone. It must be written. Take you the pen; my sight is failing, my touch is dull. Take the pen, and write what I tell you.”

Sarah, instead of obeying, hid her face in the bed-cover, and wept bitterly.

“You have been with me ever since my marriage,” Mrs. Treverton went on. “You have been my friend more than my servant. Do you refuse my last request? You do!

Fool! look up and listen to me. On your peril, refuse to take the pen. Write, or I shall not rest in my grave. *Write, or as true as there is a Heaven above us, I will come to you from the other world!*"

Sarah started to her feet with a faint scream.

"You make my flesh creep!" she whispered, fixing her eyes on her mistress's face with a stare of superstitious horror.

At the same instant, the overdose of the stimulating medicine began to affect Mrs. Treverton's brain. She rolled her head restlessly from side to side of the pillow—repeated vacantly a few lines from one of the old play-books which had been removed from her bed—and suddenly held out the pen to the servant, with a theatrical wave of the hand, and a glance upward at an imaginary gallery of spectators.

"Write!" she cried, with an awful mimicry of her old stage voice. "Write!" And the weak hand was waved again with a forlorn, feeble imitation of the old stage gesture.

Closing her fingers mechanically on the pen that was thrust between them, Sarah, with her eyes still expressing the superstitious terror which her mistress's words had aroused, waited for the next command. Some minutes elapsed before Mrs. Treverton spoke again. She still retained her senses sufficiently to be vaguely conscious of the effect which the medicine was producing on her, and to be desirous of combating its further progress before it succeeded in utterly confusing her ideas. She asked first for the smelling-bottle, next for some Eau de Cologne.

This last, poured onto her handkerchief and applied to her forehead, seemed to prove successful in partially clearing her faculties. Her eyes recovered their steady look of intelligence; and, when she again addressed her maid, reiterating the word "Write," she was able to enforce the direction by beginning immediately to dictate in quiet, deliberate, determined tones. Sarah's tears fell fast; her lips murmured

fragments of sentences in which entreaties, expressions of penitence, and exclamations of fear were all strangely mingled together; but she wrote on submissively, in wavering lines, until she had nearly filled the first two sides of the note-paper. Then Mrs. Treverton paused, looked the writing over, and, taking the pen, signed her name at the end of it. With this effort, her powers of resistance to the exciting effect of the medicine seemed to fail her again. The deep flush began to tinge her cheeks once more, and she spoke hurriedly and unsteadily when she handed the pen back to her maid.

“Sign!” she cried, beating her hand feebly on the bed-clothes. “Sign ‘Sarah Leeson, witness.’ No!—write ‘Accomplice.’ Take your share of it; I won’t have it shifted on me. Sign, I insist on it! Sign as I tell you.”

Sarah obeyed; and Mrs. Treverton taking the paper from her, pointed to it solemnly, with a return of the stage gesture which had escaped her a little while back.

“You will give this to your master,” she said, “when I am dead; and you will answer any questions he puts to you as truly as if you were before the judgment-seat.”

Clasping her hands fast together, Sarah regarded her mistress, for the first time, with steady eyes, and spoke to her for the first time in steady tones.

“If I only knew that I was fit to die,” she said, “oh, how gladly I would change places with you!”

“Promise me that you will give the paper to your master,” repeated Mrs. Treverton. “Promise—no! I won’t trust your promise—I’ll have your oath. Get the Bible—the Bible the clergyman used when he was here this morning. Get it, or I shall not rest in my grave. Get it, *or I will come to you from the other world.*”

The mistress laughed as she reiterated that threat. The maid shuddered, as she obeyed the command which it was designed to impress on her.