

# The Wade Monument

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MY UNCLE FREDERICK DIED in the early days of 1915, and so, though he left me his house, a little money, and a good many miscellaneous possessions, it was only a few months ago that I was able to examine them or to have any idea of what the latter consisted. I was on the Western Front during the first half of the Great War, and when I recovered from the severe wound which brought me home and it was decreed that I could march no longer, I left the Service and went as an ambulance driver to Palestine. After the armistice I settled with my lame leg and a new-made wife in Uncle Frederick's house, where I began, in time, to go through a very wilderness of boxes filled with his private papers.

I had always liked my uncle. He was a tall, spare man who looked like an American—that type of old-fashioned, rather grim American seen in illustrations to New England tales—clean shaven, in semi-clerical black. He always wore the strangely-shaped tall hat of his youth. Where he got these hats from I know not, but they must certainly have been made specially for him. He enjoyed what used to be called 'an elegant leisure', living out his bachelor life among his books. He wrote voluminously; notes, extracts, comments; though these seemed to produce no result, in that they never saw the light. I used to suppose that they were the outcome of some definite system of thought, but when I came to look at the contents of the boxes, what struck me most was that no plan was distinguishable. He must simply have had a passion for recording. There were no consecutive diaries, nothing but records of things seen, things heard, things remembered. It was the sense of history run wild. What gave them value was the mellow humanity of the mind running through the patchwork.

It is one of these isolated papers that I now give in full, just as it came into my hands; carefully written and with the leisureliness that was in his speech and ways.

I had not long left Oxford in 1876 when I first went to Minterne Brevil. I cannot quite recall what took me there, but I think it was the talk of some casual acquaintance who drew an alluring picture of the quaintness of the small seaside towns on that line of coast stretching between Southampton and Plymouth. Perhaps

it was hardly the neighbourhood that a young man, presumably athirst for life, might be expected to choose as a recreation ground; but out-of-the-way places have appealed to me always, and I think there is scarcely anything more interesting than to step quietly into some backwater and to let its history and suggestions gradually reveal themselves. It is like descending into an almost dark cave and waiting till the surrounding details come out of their obscurity and the slowly adjusting eye becomes aware of unsuspected objects, crannies, strange stones, footmarks in the sand. The obvious history of a place is accessible to all who desire to know it, but the other, shadowy history, which is the reality of the composite thing, which has brought its coherent parts together, which is, as the root of the flower, hidden in the ground—that is the soul of it all. I did not know this when I was a young man, or rather, I had not formulated the knowledge, but, looking back on myself, I can see that it influenced me.

It was June and I had taken a room in a farm house near the top of the steep hill that runs down to the town. The sea below was blue and glittering like a foreign sea and the houses were clustered in the little bay. That outburst of white flowers which comes with the near approach of midsummer was lighting up bank and hedgerow—white chervil, like lace, white catchfly, ox-eye daisies, and the white burnet rose—all were dazzling in the sunlight. Down the hill above the main part of the town, its western door almost in the street, its eastern wall on the cliff, stood the parish church with a square tower, grey against the expanse of blue as one looked down on it. The sea had encroached and eaten away much of the coast by Mintern Brevil, crawling up as though waiting at the foot of its crumbling ramparts to swallow church and churchyard in the fullness of time.

One evening, strolling by, I turned aside up the steps and entered the porch. The main body of the church looked attractive from the inside, being on a higher plane than the spot on which I stood and so giving a different general impression from that produced by the interior of ordinary places of worship. It appeared to be more old-fashioned than ancient, and a gallery ran round three sides of the building, under which I passed as I emerged from the porch. There were many memorial tablets round the walls and a few large monuments with the usual urns and emblems. I never could resist memorial tablets. Their occasional bits of information and humanity challenge my mind to clothe the recorded names with personalities, and they raise a whole concourse of sailors lost at sea, soldiers fallen

in half-forgotten campaigns, women long widowed, and pompous-sounding lawyers and divines. I have always found a few bare words of detail on a memorial tablet worth volumes anywhere else.

There was a tall marble slab on the wall of the northern aisle which bore an immense amount of lettering, and I went over to see whether there was anything suggestive to be found there. So long was it and so wordy that I had to sit down in a neighbouring pew to read it. It was a perfect example of those records of human hypocrisy which were the delight of the early nineteenth century, and it commemorated a family belonging to the town. I wondered if there were any descendants left alive to be put to the blush every Sunday by its weary and fulsome pomp. Were there any to whom the following could comment itself? . . .

Sacred to the memory of

THOMAS CORBY WADE, Esquire, Solicitor,

Born at Mintern Brevil, February 24th, 1780.

An affectionate Father and devoted Husband, he fulfilled his private Duties in the same Christian Spirit which actuated his every Public Deed. His strict and honourable probity was the pride of his Fellow Townsmen. His Charities were munificent. To an Upright Character he joined a Suavity of Address which gained him the consideration of all who came in contact with him in his Daily Walk of Life. He contributed largely to every Municipal Scheme which his Enlightened Judgement approved and was untiring in his efforts to ameliorate the condition of the Deserving Poor. He died, the True Example of a Professing and Believing Christian, at his Residence in Avon Street, Oct. 1st, 1841, aged 61 years, regretted by an Afflicted Family and an Inconsolable Public.

Also of

His wife, ELIZA, daughter of the Rev. W. CLARK, Vicar of Cobton, in the county of Dorset. Born June 5th, 1796. Died Aug. 19th, 1835, aged 38 years. A tender wife and mother, bringing up her children in the fear of the Lord and providing a pattern for her neighbours of all that a pious Christian woman should be.

Also of

THOMAS CLARK WADE, M.D., son of the above, whose brilliant intellectual gifts earned universal acclamation and whose practice was one of the largest in the south-west of England. Born March 23rd, 1815. Died esteemed and in full assurance of salvation, May 3rd, 1858, at the age of 43.

Also of

MARY ELIZA. Born Oct. 12th, 1817, who died in Infancy.

Also of

EDWIN, born Dec. 1st, 1818, who by his industry and talents made a large fortune in Jamaica, and died 1858, in pious resignation to his Maker's will, from the results of an accident. Lamented by all who had the privilege of knowing him.

Then came a gap, and some further way down the stone were these words:

Alured. Died 1851.

I rose, exasperated. I could picture this intolerable family, whose only recommendation in my eyes was the fact that almost all its members had died moderately young. I looked with relief on a small brass not far off which bore merely the name and age of an obscure officer who had ended his life on the Gold Coast, dying of yellow fever in the place to which his duty had taken him. What a happy contrast to the tame brood of Wades with their resounding complacent virtues! The only original thing about the Wade monument was the odd contrast between 'Alured' and his relations, for his name stood apart from theirs as though unfit to appear in that galaxy of rectitude. Why was he so slighted? Why was there not so much as a word to give him significance in that welter of words? I wondered whether he had 'died in infancy', like 'Mary Eliza', but the time elapsed between his mother's death and his own forbade the possibility.

I made my way to the western gallery. It was Jacobean, of fine carved wood, and having examined it from below, I ran hurriedly up the stairs, for the light was failing and there was a piece of tapestry on the wall behind the gallery pews that I was curious about. One does not often find tapestry in churches.

I paused for a moment in the front seat. From that position I could see the Wade monument, and I was astonished to notice that a woman was sitting just where I had sat to examine it and was doing the same thing. I was puzzled because

I had come up the short stair in a couple of bounds and was certain that the pew was empty when I put my foot on the first step. To reach that spot before I could look down she must have run.

She was a small person, and though I could only see her back, I could guess that she was in distress, for she sat with her head bent forward, and now and again I saw her put her hand up to her eyes. I quite forgot the tapestry in looking at her. She wore a sort of grey cape trimmed with blue; though I did not know much about the fashion of women's garments I could see that she was dressed like no one I had ever met. All at once she rose and crossed the aisle, showing a small-featured profile and the frilled grey border of the hood or cap she wore. There was something blue on it, too—a rosette or a lappet, or whatever these things are called. To my further astonishment she went up to the Wade monument and stood in front of it; then she put out her hand, and there was just enough light left for me to see that she passed it over a part of the stone with a movement that was almost a caress.

I sat rigid, afraid lest the least sound should disturb her. She went back to her place in the pew, and sank down on her knees, and I knew by her heaving shoulders that she wept, but so silently that not a sob woke the quiet of the empty church—empty but for myself sitting breathless in the gallery. Then she rose and crossed to the centre aisle, without looking up, and passed out by the main door just below the place where I sat.

It was on a Monday that I saw her, and she was a good deal in my mind during that week. Once I thought I had caught her figure disappearing down a side street of Mintern Brevil; once I had a fancied glimpse of her grey cap behind the curtain of a window, though I could not be sure; but when Sunday came I went to the parish church—purposely, not too early—that I might peep through the door at the worshippers in the north aisle. If the seat in which we had both sat were her own, and were she there, I might contrive to get a place near enough to it to see her. I wondered at the time why I was impelled to take so much trouble; I think I am less surprised now.

Prayers had begun as I stood at the door to peer in, and, waiting till the congregation rose from its knees, I had full opportunity for my search. There she was, in the same pew at the end next the aisle, with her grey and blue tippet, sitting

upright this time, as though oblivious of all that was going on, quite still. As the Amen produced a general movement, I saw that a verger was observing me from beyond the Wade monument and I stepped quickly forward to get nearer to my goal before he should be upon me to regulate my movements. We met exactly parallel to it, and he took me by the arm.

‘Two vacant seats there,’ he said, thrusting me towards the pew in which the lady sat.

We were close beside her, and she looked round at me, making no movement to let me pass in. I hesitated.

‘Two vacant seats, sir,’ repeated the verger, more loudly.

There was only one that I could see, on the other side of the quiet little figure; I was shocked at the man’s free and easy manner, for he leaned across her, pointing, stretching his arm just in front of her face. It seemed all the worse to me because I had begun to suspect the odd little woman of not being in her right mind, and I was angry to think that he should so take advantage of her weakness. I made a sort of apologetic bow, and went in, because it seemed the only way to put an end to his impertinence, and because the further occupants of the pew were looking at us intently.

There was a hassock in front of her and her feet were on it. As she did not stir them I stepped over, and, being nervously anxious not to incommode her, laid hold of the ledge where the Prayer-books lay to steady myself, and in doing so dropped my stick.

It fell against her knees, but, instead of sliding down the slope of her skirt, passed straight through it to the floor, as a stone might fall through transparent water. I could see it lying upon the boards, although the grey folds of her dress and the outline of her limbs were between me and it.

I subsided into my place, staggered beyond all power of expression. For some time I was too much bewildered to notice the looks of surprise and censure cast on me by those who stood beyond us; I merely sat on, though all were standing, and the Jubilate was ended and the Psalms begun before I had the sense to rise to my feet. I took up a Prayer-book mechanically and turned over the leaves, unable to concentrate my mind on finding the place. My right-hand neighbour pointed it out

with a detached disapproval of manner that would have annoyed me had I been capable of feeling anything. I was in the mental condition of a man who has suddenly fallen into the sea and been as suddenly pulled out, who lies on the beach unable to adjust himself to a dry and stationary world.

When I had recovered a little I glanced stealthily at the woman on my left, but she appeared to be as solid as anybody else. She inspired no dread in me. My only trouble was the difficulty of keeping my head in her presence. I was young, and therefore acutely conscious of the attitude of strangers towards me, and I greatly feared to make myself ridiculous.

In time I grew more calm and began to argue with myself. I did not dream—I knew that I was sober and I believed that I was sane; I hardly dared to look directly at her, though I much wished she would turn her head and let me see whether there were traces of the distress of a few days ago. No one else appeared to be interested in her. I wondered why the verger had been so boorish—surely if she frequented the church he would have known her and hesitated to treat her so rudely, lest he should be taken to task by some looker-on who knew her too. Then I recalled his words: ‘Two vacant seats, sir’, and the truth broke on me.

He had not seen her. Presumably it was I, and I only, who was aware of her presence.

I became more and more convinced that this was a fact. Though I could see no difference between the solidity of her face and that of the faces near us, her feet and the lower part of her skirt now seemed hazy to my eyes, shadows beneath which lay the walking-stick I had not dared to recover. My own figure hid them from the people beside me. All that had disturbed these latter was my apparently futile agitation and the clumsiness of my entrance.

It was not until the sermon that my strange neighbour turned towards me, and, looking at me with the appealing gaze of a dumb creature, lifted her arm and pointed to the Wade monument. I made the slightest movement of assent, afraid to give myself prominence, yet unable to resist the troubled eyes. Her act finally confirmed my belief, because, though she had stretched out her arm over the end of the pew, no one had shown a sign of astonishment. She looked middle-aged, not from any lines traced by the years, but from the frilled cap she wore and the prim fashion of her clothes. The eyes that met mine were clear, rather childish, though

set in a woman's face and full of a dumb anxiety that was very pitiful. I raised my brows as if to ask a question and waited, wondering if she would understand. She nodded, pointing to an open hymn-book lying before me. I slid it along the ledge to her, but she shook her head and signed to me that I should lay in upon my knee. When I had done this she drew close to me, so close that the end of her tippet lay across my cuff; though I felt no touch, no warmth from the face so near my own as she took a gold-headed pin from the fastening of her dress and indicated letters, one after another, in the printed page. Then she paused, scanning my face, whilst I read the word they formed. It was A-l-u-r-e-d.

It is almost impossible to describe the state of mind into which those three syllables threw me. To say that I was bewildered is to say nothing; but the sense of something compelling and inevitable—of having known all the time in some recess of my being that I was concerned with the name of this man—was so strong that self-consciousness fled and I forgot everybody in the church but the one who, so to speak, was not there. I took out my pocket-book and wrote down the six letters whilst the anxious eyes near my shoulder followed very line. The gold-headed pin was still till my pencil should stop. Then, when I looked round for further guidance, the face and the tippeted figure had faded into nothingness and only the pin was visible against the page of the hymn-book, pointing to the letters which followed. A-v-o-n S-t-r-e-e-t s-e-a-r-c-h. I had just time to write them when it ceased and was gone.

Through the rest of the sermon I sat without hearing a word. The place beside me was empty, and I was left with a maddening curiosity and the fear lest I should never be able to gratify it. I put away my pocket-book.

As I walked home I decided that I would not look at it again till next day. 'If this is really an illusion,' I said to myself, 'I shall find tomorrow that there is nothing written here.'

I went out into the fields that afternoon, and, lying under a clump of bushes, turned the experience of the morning over and over. There was trouble about this man, Alured, though he was dead; that was plain enough, and I began to piece together the scraps that had been committed to me and to compare them with what I could recall of the words on the monument. 'Avon Street' was suggestive, for the inscription said that Alured's father had died at 'his residence' there. It was there,

evidently, that 'search' should be made. I wondered whether the house was still standing. There was nothing to be done today, Sunday, for all the shops were closed and I had no acquaintance from whom I could seek information. True, there was my landlady; but when I made inquiry of her that evening it profited me nothing, for I was confronted with that dreadful obstacle, the blank wall of the purely domestic mind.

Next day I went down to Mintern Brevil. One subject had driven all others from my mind. I had lain awake half the night. My idea was to question the tradesmen and innkeepers, to tap that stream of gossip and reminiscence which flows under the life of all small towns. I did not know Avon Street, but I was curious to see the 'residence' of the Wades; it was no detective spirit which urged me, but my own sense of romance—strong in those days—and the fantastic hope of doing some possible service, palliating some undiscovered grief. I do not think I was a superstitious young man, and had I been so, superstition could hardly be said to enter into the case. I was not concerned with superstition, one way or another. I had merely seen a strange thing, as I might have seen an elopement or a street accident, and I wanted to know all that might be known about it. It seemed no part of my duty to persuade myself that it had not happened.

I had just passed the church when I cursed myself for a fool. Why not go in? Why not go back to the same place? Why not take up the hymn-book and see whether the anxious figure would appear at my side and join again the thread which had broken so quickly? The door was open, the place empty, and in I went.

I sat down and took up the book, and to make the parallel complete, sought for the same place in it. I had forgotten the page and had to turn up the first line of the hymn in the index. When I had done so I looked up and saw the little woman standing beside the Wade monument. I cannot say that I saw her come towards me, for the next thing I was aware of was her presence at my side and her hand holding the gold-headed pin.

This time I was less taken aback and more able to think for myself, so I brought out my pocket-book and, laying it beside the other on my knee, I wrote 'which house?' after the 'Avon Street' I had already traced there.

The pin moved as it had done before.

'A t-r-e-e.'

'Am I to search the tree?' I wrote.

'S-e-a-r-c-h t-h-e l-a-d-d-e-r – r-o-o-m d-o t-h-i-s f-o-r A-l-u-r-e-d.'

'I will,' I wrote; but I broke off, for the pin was running on again.

'B-e-h-i-n-d t-h-e d-i-a-m-o-n-d-s f-o-r p-i-t-y-s s-a-k-e f-o-r p-o-o-r A-l-u-r-e-d.'

'But what am I to look for?'

As I wrote this question—the crux of all—and waited for the expected answer, the pin was gone.

I left the church and went straight to Avon Street, directed by a passing workman, and embarked on the preliminaries of a search for something the very nature of which I did not know. I had written 'I will' on the impulse of the moment, but I felt bound at least to try to make good my word. It might be an awkward task, but it was too late to think of that, for, wild goose chase or no, I was committed to it.

Avon Street was a quiet, remote place, not properly a street at all, but a row of detached houses far back from the sea and approached by a modest alley from the main thoroughfare. Only one true seaside touch had cropped up in two or three of these, and that was the faded-looking green verandah with a sloping tin roof which seems to belong particularly to the south coast of England. Each had a small patch of garden railed in from the pavement, and I saw with interest that there was but one tree in the place, a large araucaria, luxuriantly grown, by whose thin sombre arms shadowed the dead-looking windows by the door of the most old-fashioned of all. I had so far returned to a normal frame of mind that I smiled to think of my question of whether I should search the tree. I could not imagine how anyone would proceed who had to search a 'monkey-puzzle'.

If this house was the Wade house there would seem to be real meaning in the directions of the woman in the church, and I opened the iron gate and approached the door; I was not prepared to confront any remaining member of the family who might be within and to state my extraordinary errand, so I had no choice but to ask for a fictitious person and to hope that the act might elicit the name of the owner.

'Is Mr Jerningham at home?' I inquired, taking the first moderately uncommon name I could think of.

The thin-lipped woman who answered the bell eyed me resentfully.

'This is Miss Wade's house,' she said, 'we have no gentlemen here.'

She watched me departing, unmollified by my apology. I could feel her eyes on my back as I unlatched the iron gate.

It had been an easy thing to identify the 'residence', but the next step—to get into it—would be a very different matter, and I felt a good deal discouraged. The keeper of the door seemed to look on me as an impostor (she little knew with what reason), and I could imagine that the dweller behind it, were I ever to reach her presence with my story, would take me for some wandering madman. A spinster—a member of that family described on the monument—what hope had I of being listened to by such a person! I went down to the shore and sat on the sea-wall to take council with myself what my next step should be.

I did not know much about the clergy. My father was at the bar and had no clerical friends. But when I came to consider which individual in a community would be most accessible to a stranger, I could only think of the parson. The longing to halve the burden of my experience was great, and I also reflected that, their family monument being set up the parish church, the surviving Wades would probably belong to its congregation. I had not the vaguest remembrance of the last Sunday's preacher, for I had had other things to think of. However, I could come to no better conclusion and I made up my mind to appeal to him. But I would put it off till tomorrow; it would take me till then to screw up my courage.

Next day, cold with the dread of making a fool of myself to no purpose, I was ushered into a vicarage study where a pale, plain-looking little man rose to receive me. There was nothing remarkable about him but a crooked smile that gave character to his face. He asked me very civilly what he could do for me.

The knowledge of my position engulfed me as a wave engulfs a pebble of the short. I was tongue-tied. Everything in the room was solid and spoke so loudly of settled habits, of daily duties, and all reasonable and accepted things that, in my acute consciousness of the fantastic nature of what I had come to say, my heart died within me. Here was the recognised exponent of spiritual things and here was

I with this moonshine tale of the unseen upon my lips. I felt like a child with a tin sword before a general.

He was misled by my bearing, for it was plain that he suspected some young man's scrape, some difficulty which youth might sooner disclose to a stranger than to a parent. He gave me a little time to collect myself and then said with his crooked smile:

'You need not hesitate to tell me anything. What am I here for but to listen? If you speak plainly to me I will speak plainly to you—that is all.'

So I began. I told it to him baldly and consecutively, from the beginning, when I stood idly before the wade monument, to the end, when I turned my back on the house with the araucaria.

When I had finished he got up and stood by the mantel-piece.

'And this is absolutely true?' he said at last; 'upon your honour, this is true?'

'Sir,' I exclaimed, 'can you suppose that I should put myself in this position for a childish invention? The risk of being taken for a liar is no advantage.'

'I beg your pardon,' said he.

'It is true, upon my honour.'

He sat down again and we were both silent for a little while.

'What do you make of it, sir?' I inquired at last.

'I don't know what to make of it.'

'And what ought I to do?'

He was looking at the floor and he raised his eyes to mine.

'You said you wrote "I will", did you not, when she told you to search?'

'Yes.'

'Then you must do it.'

'You think there is something in it, then?' I exclaimed, catching at his support.

'I tell you I don't know what to think; but I am certain that we should keep our

promises.'

I nodded.

'Do you know anything of the family?' I asked; 'I came here, hoping you might give me some help in finding them.'

'Miss Emily Wade is the last one left now,' he replied, 'but though she is my parishioner, I can hardly say that I know her. The one I can tell you about is Alured Wade, though he has been dead these five and twenty years. It is owing to him that they left Mintern Brevil. The house was let at one time, but afterwards it stood empty till Miss Wade came back a couple of years ago. She sees nobody and goes nowhere, not even to church.'

'But why is it owing to Alured?' I broke in.

'He was in a solicitor's office, and he made away with a large sum of money and died in prison. That is why they left the town and why she lives as she does. She had brought Alured up, for she was ten years older than he when they were left motherless. He died at twenty, poor wretched lad. I have only been here a few years, so I never saw him.'

'There was something about diamonds too,' said I. 'It is written down in my pocket-book.'

'I can't imagine what that can be. I have never heard anything about that.'

'Well,' said I, ruefully, 'I must do my best, as you say, but how to approach Miss Wade I don't know, for it seems she is even more unapproachable than I suspected. If I write to her is there any chance that she will consent to see me? Is it too much to ask you to give me a word of introduction? I am really no impostor, but you do not know how I dread it.'

'You are no coward, young man, all the same.'

'I will try not to be,' said I.

'Well,' he went on, 'you have no right to hang back, neither have I. I will go to Miss Wade, not because I think I can influence her to listen to you, but because she may think it less of an intrusion from one of my calling than from any other man. Go home now and wait till you hear from me.'

I got up.

'I can never thank you enough, sir,' I said.

'Wait to thank me till we have succeeded,' he replied, smiling crookedly.

For two days after this conversation I dreaded the postman. I did not know which would make me more uncomfortable, a summons to Avon Street or the news that nothing further could be done; but on the third day I received a letter from the parson.

'... I have had a difficult business,' he wrote, 'and for some time I had little hope of success, but at last I have got Miss Wade's consent to see you and now I can only leave you to do your best. I told you that you were no coward, but I now add that you may possibly become one when you meet Miss Wade. Do not take this as discouragement, but as warning, and remember, if I may venture to advise you, that there is nothing like keeping one's temper in all circumstances. I hope you will let me hear whether any new light is thrown on this strange subject. . . .'

At the appointed hour I stood once more on the threshold of the house with the araucaria, and this time was grudgingly admitted and taken across a small, dingy hall to a sitting room on the ground floor. There was no one in it, and I had been waiting fully ten minutes when Miss Emily Wade entered.

I had no nerve consciously to observe the woman herself, but only to feel the effect she produced on me; though now, after the lapse of years, I can describe her in detail. At a little distance she appeared to be the embodiment of commonplace middle age, but as she advanced with a stiff bow, which was the mere drawing-in of her chin, and desired me to be seated, I saw my mistake. She was slow and cumbrous and her large face, almost pear-shaped, sallow and very smooth in its outlines, reminded me of something Asiatic. Though she was so large, you would not call her fat, for the softness suggested by that word was absent. She had the heavy thickness of something stuffed tightly with sawdust, and she wore a muslin cap with a velvet bow, the recognised head-dress of all well-to-do elderly women at that date. Her hair, showing no thread of grey, was parted smoothly. I think she had the smallest mouth I ever saw and the depth of her chin made it look as though set too high in her face. Her straight, heavy nose seemed to start too soon from

between her brows. I have never known the colour of her eyes, for their opaqueness was all that I could realise. She sat down without a word and waited for me to begin. There was not enough expression in her face to show hostility, but I felt it emanating from her.

How I embarked on my story I cannot remember. I heard myself speaking as though I were listening to another person, and the opaque, secretive eyes never left my face. I will do her the justice to say that she did not once try to interrupt me. When I had finished, a sense of ineptness and anticlimax and futility enfolded me like a choking mist.

'And why have you brought me this tale?' she inquired, a sneer touching her lip.

'I considered myself bound to do so.'

'Indeed,' she said, slowly, 'and what do you expect to gain by it?'

'A clear conscience.'

She looked disconcerted, I suppose, by the directness of my answer. It was the first indication of any kind of feeling that I had seen since she entered.

I do not know what happy intuition spurred me to thrust her up against the matter in question before she had recovered her balance. Her strength was to sit still and so, no doubt, instinct impelled me to keep her moving.

'I see that I have put you into an awkward position,' I said.

'Not in the least, I assure you!' she exclaimed, a slight flush rising to her forehead.

It was evident to me that the very thought of herself in such a plight was intolerable to her.

'I am truly sorry to have upset you,' I continued, 'but I can well imagine that my intrusion is annoying. I——'

'You misunderstand me,' she broke in. 'I am entirely indifferent. Be sure of that.'

'But it is very natural. Believe me, I have every sympathy with you, and I can

only apologise, placed as I am. Perhaps you would like me to go?’

I half rose from my seat. It was a rash thing to do, for had she said ‘Yes’ I should have had no choice but to depart. Despite the parson’s advice I had let my irritation get the better of me in an overwhelming desire to shake her sullen insolence and the vanity which made her see herself as unassailable, imperturbable at all points. It was something inert and unenterprising in her that alone prevented her from dismissing a person who shook, even for a moment, her placid experience. Effort was her horror. I could guess that.

I think she would willingly have strangled me. Stupid though I believe she was, she had an uneasy feeling that I had made it difficult for her to dismiss me with dignity.

But her temper was suffering, as well as mine.

‘I told the Vicar that I would see you and hear your—your—what you wanted to say—and I have done it. What do you want? Let us get through with it quickly,’ she exclaimed, angrily.

‘Will you allow me to see the ladder-room, if there is such a place?’ I asked, my own anger cooling as the prospect bettered itself.

‘It is empty. There is nothing there.’

‘Then there is a room called the ladder-room!’ I exclaimed. ‘Miss Wade—do, pray allow me to see it! Let your maid take me there. I will not ask you to go with me.’

‘I will certainly go with you,’ she replied.

It was no civility which prompted her words; her look made their meaning plain. It said ‘Do you suppose I should trust you out of my sight?’

But the desire to be disagreeable had betrayed her; it had gained me my point. She rose, and I opened the door and followed her out.

We went slowly up the dark stairs of the musty little house; it had three storeys and at each landing she stopped, breathing heavily, that I might understand the infinite inconvenience I was causing her. This made me very uncomfortable as a man. As a human being I cared nothing.

When we reached the top floor I found myself facing a ladder of about four rungs with a hand-rail at one side; it led to a door which looked as if it had not been painted for half a century.

'Go on,' said Miss Wade.

I went up and thrust the door open; it needed a strong push and I almost stumbled into a small attic room, papered and with a dormer window in the sloping roof letting in the afternoon light. My companion came heavily after me. It was perfectly empty, but for three objects: a deal table in the recess of the window, a tiny, dusty picture hanging on a nail, and an unused bookshelf fastened on the wall. There was not so much as a fireplace.

Miss Wade stood looking at me with sullen triumph in her opaque eyes. Her mouth was pinched to a small line above the long bulk of her chin. I felt very foolish.

'And was this always known as the ladder-room?' I asked.

She assented.

In spite of the fact that the gold-headed pin had, so far, pointed to nothing but the truth, I could only stare round on the unpromising place, humiliated by the ineffectual figure I cut. There was not even a drawer in the table that I might open. I went to the wall and peered at the little faintly-coloured daguerreotype in its frame that seemed cut out of black tin.

Then I started back and turned to Miss Wade. I suppose that triumph must have loosened her tongue, for the first words she had yet volunteered came from her pursed lips.

'My mother,' she said, shortly.

I should have known the portrait, even without the grey cap and the tippet with blue trimming.

'That is the lady I saw in the church,' I said.

I could not bring myself to ask Miss Wade whether this wretched attic had been Alured's room, but I felt sure of it. I did not know if she had learned from the Vicar that he had told me the boy's history and, in any case, I did not want to hear

his name on her lips. The sight of the daguerreotype stirred an overwhelming pity in me. That was Alured's mother, the mother who had been replaced, for him, by the heavy, sordid woman in the doorway; I could imagine what such a change must have meant to the little boy who had slept in this fireless room. He had been 'brought up' by her, been completely in her power; she had dealt out his punishments and held him, as grown-up people hold children, in the hollow of her hand. Here he had lived, the only young thing in the house, through his motherless years, only to die in prison at last. I thought of the desolating tears of my own happy childhood—rare, indeed, with me, but, probably, not rare with him. I could see him here, alone with his griefs and misunderstandings and hidden disappointments, under the attic roof, perhaps looking at the daguerreotype through wet eyelashes and knowing that his sins and fears and all the thousand, thousand childish secrets and dreads must be locked into his lonely heart because the face in the frame was only a face in a frame, and no more. I longed to be out of the house, anywhere away from Miss Wade. She was immeasurably more hateful to me now that I had seen this picture in this place.

'There are no diamonds here, after all, you see,' she said.

As she spoke my eyes were on the bookcase. Perhaps, if she had not made that derisive speech, we should have left the miserable room no wiser than we came, but at the word 'diamonds' I sprang forward, for light flashed into my mind. On the wall behind the empty bookshelves a piece of chintz was nailed to keep the books from rubbing it; it was a hideous thing, grimy and faded; blue, with a yellow diamond pattern covering its dismal expanse.

'Yes, there are,' I cried, laying my palm against it, 'these are the diamonds!'

There was a rent in the stuff where it was crossed by the middle shelf, but I could not get my hand into it because the horizontal board was set in so close to the wall. At the lower edge of the chintz a row of nails stretched it tight, and just above these I could feel a thin, square object lying as though in a pocket. Without further ado I got my thumb in between two of the nails and ripped up the rotten stuff. It tore at a touch and a slim paper packet fell out and dropped on the floor.

Miss Wade said nothing; anger and surprise devoured her. I could tell that her wrath was raised, not by my summary dealing with her furniture, but by the proof, now lying at my feet, that there had really been something to find and that I had

found it. I picked up the packet and handed it to her.

‘Thanks,’ she said, putting it into her pocket. ‘No we will go downstairs.’

Although there was the handrail, she had to turn and step backwards down the ladder. At any other time I should have laughed inwardly at the mixture of displeasure and physical discomfort on the large, white face. But I did not laugh now. I had reached the goal towards which my whole mind had strained for nearly a week; I had started on such a strange quest as few had ever undertaken; and now, what I suspected was the key of it all had passed into the hands of this repellent creature! In my folly I had not foreseen this very obvious climax, but I now saw it written on the pursed-up mouth and secretive eyes that would not meet my own. I should hear nothing more; I could not protest; I could do nothing but submit. She had turned the tables on me after all.

She stopped in the hall outside the sitting-room door, her hand on the door-knob, and made the same stiff bow with which she had received me. There was nothing for it but to take up my hat and go.

I was furious as I went up the street, outraged in every feeling. The consistent rudeness I had met with made my blood boil. Being very young, I marvelled that, in a civilised world, the attempt to do what was right—at some cost to myself, too—should bring me nothing but malice; and beyond that, baffled curiosity wept lamentably in my breast. It was cruel, abominable, that I should be debarred from knowing whether my thankless labours had been of any use to anyone, alive or dead.

I had lost all interest in Mintern Brevil. I was not such a fool as to imagine that Miss Wade would send me any information, and it seemed that the best thing I could do was to depart next day and try to forget the whole business. While I was packing, the Vicar walked up to the farm and asked me to spend a few days with him. I was immensely flattered, for I liked him, and shouldering my small portmanteau I accompanied him home.

We were at breakfast on the following morning when the post came in. I had no correspondence, but he had a good deal, and, when he had turned over his pile of letters, he opened one and became so much absorbed in it that he stopped

eating. I went on steadily. At last he looked up.

'This is your affair, too,' he said.

There had been three enclosures in the envelope and he threw one of them across to me.

'DEAR MR WILLIAMS,' I read, 'The person you spoke of to me called at my house the day before yesterday and insisted upon my climbing with him to the attic. While we were there a packet dropped from behind a bookshelf. I think the information which it contained should be made public, and as I do not want to be annoyed by inquisitive people, I will ask you to do so by mentioning it, when opportunity occurs, to your parishioners. In order that you may speak with authority I enclose these two letters which I shall be obliged if you will return. Meanwhile, I will consider what other steps should be taken.

'Yours truly,  
'Emily Wade.'

And now read this,' said the Vicar, after I had finished. I took the yellow, discoloured paper and smoothed it out.

October 12, 1850.

DEAR NED—I have not had a moment's ease since our conversation after we left the office yesterday, for I can think of nothing but the terrible story you told me. You know what I feel. My friendship for you must give you full assurance of that, and the remorse you expressed as we walked home together will not be aggravated by any reproach from me. What is weighing on you is weighing on me too. Think of your mother lying there; we know from the doctor that she has only a few months to live—if that. What will it be to her? I am convinced, *determined*, that nothing must be left undone to spare her the knowledge that would prevent her from dying in peace. This is my proposal, the plan I have thought out. I am going to take the theft upon myself. We must leave the matter alone till it is discovered; that will gain time, possibly much time, and I will then confess it, holding you bound to be silent. Ned, think of your mother. Remember that I am tied by none of the

considerations that tie you. My father is dead ten years ago, my mother I can only vaguely remember; all I know of her is the picture in my room. My elder brothers are prosperous men who can take care of themselves. You know my sister. You, who have known me since we were both children, will understand what I need not say. Your mother's goodness and love to me when I most needed it is all I am thinking of now. I am not thinking of you. I am thinking of her. It is Sunday and my sister is at church, so I have had leisure to consider, and my mind is made up.

If you agree, *as you must do*, I will require you to do two things. You must write me a letter accepting the proposal I have made and giving me your word that as soon as your mother is dead you will acknowledge the truth. I will make a copy of this letter that I am now writing and seal it up with yours in a packet. It will be put in a place that only you and I will know of, and as soon as possible after your mother's funeral, you will carry it to a person whom we shall both select and who will know how to use it for my release.

We do not know how soon the discovery of what you have done may be made, so whatever we settle must be settled at once in all its details. I shall see you tomorrow at the office and we must walk home together. But before we meet I must tell you again, lest you should have any hesitation in agreeing, that *I am doing it for her*.

Your sincere friend,  
ALURED WADE.

The Vicar pushed the other paper towards me. It was dated two days after the foregoing letter. The writer had not taken long in making up his mind.

'I accept all the condition of Alured Wade's letter of Oct. 12, 1850,' it ran, 'and I hereby faithfully promise that, on my mother's decease, I will do as desired by him with the two letters, using every endeavour to clear his name by means of them and by admitting the fraud which I have committed and for which he, for the reasons he states, has taken the blame.'

'EDWARD GROVES STEPHENSON.'

'Poor lad,' said the Vicar. 'poor little lad.'

His words took me back to the attic room with the little boy I had pictured alone in it. I was glad, more glad than I could say, to know that someone had befriended him; the measure of his gratitude showed me, like lamplight, how dark the dark places must have been to him. How glad I was that I had bearded that heavy woman with the opaque eyes and the velvet bow in her cap! It rather awed me to think that I had been the means of disinterring that obscure and unrecognised sacrifice. For the moment I had forgotten the woman in the church, but she returned to my mind, bringing with her a mist of speculation in which I lost myself.

The Vicar's voice broke through it.

'There is another piece that fits into the story,' he said. 'I know the name of Ned Stephenson well. He disappeared very suddenly from Mintern Brevil, years before I came here; it was supposed, to America. In any case he was never heard of again. I wonder did his mother cheat the doctor and outlive Alured, and was his baseness a crime against his fellow-clerk, or against his fellow-clerk's memory? Did he break his word to a dead man or to a live one? There is nothing on the monument to tell how far into 1851 Alured lived; but he must have died without speaking.'

'And I wonder,' said I, 'whether the packet fell down behind the chintz and was lost, or whether it was hidden there purposely till the time should come to produce it?'

'It must have been hidden,' said he, reflectively. 'If Alured had lost it, he would certainly have written another letter and made Ned write another statement, and if Ned had lost it, it would hardly have been found in the Wades' house. Had the real culprits made any attempt to tell the truth I should have heard of it when I first heard the story of Alured's crime. It is easy to guess why he disappeared.'

'And the woman in the church?'

'We know nothing about anything, said he, 'and I suppose Solomon himself was in the like position. But he said some notable things, all the same—"Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it."'

'Do you imagine that Miss Wade will add anything to the monument?' I asked, after a pause. 'She ought to do him that much justice.'

'Ah,' he said, 'I fancy that, whatever she does, her resentment will never be disturbed by a little thing like the truth. He brought discredit on her and she will never forgive him, as she will never forgive you for bringing back the memory of it.'

'But that's unreasonable!' I exclaimed, 'the disgrace is gone.'

'Think what the Wade respectability has suffered—no, she will never forgive him. To her he is a criminal still. Personally, I should like to give him a monument to himself.'

'What would you put on it?' I asked.

'Alured Wade. Saint and Martyr.'