

THE FIRST PART

CHAPTER I

In the year 1860, the reputation of Doctor Wybrow as a London physician reached its highest point. It was reported that he was one of the richest doctors in modern times.

One afternoon, the Doctor had just taken his luncheon in his consulting-room, and was sitting with a formidable list of visits to patients — when the servant announced that a lady wished to speak to him.

‘Who is she?’ the Doctor asked. ‘A stranger?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I see no strangers out of **consulting-hours**¹. Tell her what the hours are, and send her away.’

‘I have told her, sir.’

‘Well?’

‘And she won’t go.’

‘Won’t go?’ The Doctor smiled as he repeated the words. The situation rather amused him. ‘Has this obstinate lady given you her name?’ he inquired.

‘No, sir. She refused to give any name — **she said she wouldn’t keep you five minutes**², and the matter was too important to wait till tomorrow. There she is in the consulting-room; and I don’t know how to get her out.’

¹ **consulting-hours** — приёмные часы

² **she said she wouldn’t keep you five minutes** — она сказала, что не отнимет у вас и пяти минут

Doctor Wybrow considered for a moment. He had met with women in all their varieties — especially the variety which knows nothing of the value of time. A glance at his watch informed him that he must soon begin his **rounds among the patients**¹ who were waiting for him at their own houses. So he decided to escape.

‘Is the carriage at the door?’ he asked.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Very well. Open the house-door for me without any noise, and leave the lady in the consulting-room. When she gets tired, you know what to tell her. If she asks when I will return, say that I dine at my club, and spend the evening at the theatre. And softly, Thomas! If your shoes creak, I am a lost man.’

He noiselessly led the way into the hall, followed by the servant **on tip-toe**².

Did the lady in the consulting-room suspect him? Or did Thomas’s shoes creak? Was her sense of hearing unusually keen? Exactly as Doctor Wybrow passed his consulting-room, the door opened — the lady appeared on the threshold — and laid her hand on his arm.

‘I entreat you, sir, not to go away. Let me speak to you first.’

The accent was foreign; the tone was low and firm. Her fingers closed gently, and yet resolutely, on the Doctor’s arm.

Neither her language nor her action had the slightest effect. The influence that instantly stopped him, on the way to his carriage, was the silent influence of her face. The contrast between the pallor of her complexion and the glittering metallic brightness in her large black eyes held him literally spellbound. She was dressed in dark colours, with perfect taste; she was of middle height, and (apparently) of middle age — a year or two over thirty. Her nose, mouth, and chin possessed the fineness and delicacy of form. She was unquestionably a handsome person. She produced in the Doctor an overpowering feeling of profes-

¹ **rounds among the patients** — обход пациентов

² **on tip-toe** — на цыпочках

sional curiosity. The case might be something entirely new in his professional experience.

She perceived that she had produced a strong impression upon him, and dropped her hold on his arm.

'You have comforted many miserable women ' she said. 'Comfort one more, today.'

And she led the way back into the room.

The Doctor followed her, and closed the door. He placed her in the patients' chair, opposite the windows. Even in London the sun, on that summer afternoon, was dazzlingly bright. The radiant light flowed in on her. Her eyes met it unflinchingly. The smooth pallor of her un-wrinkled skin looked more fearfully white than ever.

She had, strangely enough, nothing to say to him. A curious apathy took possession of this woman. The Doctor merely inquired what he could do for her.

She said abruptly: 'I have a painful question to ask.'

'What is it?'

Her eyes travelled slowly from the window to the Doctor's face.

'I want to know, if you please, am I going mad?'

Doctor Wybrow was disappointed. Was the new patient only a hypochondriacal woman, whose malady was a disordered stomach and whose misfortune was a weak brain?

'Why do you come to me?' he asked sharply. 'Why don't you consult a psychiatrist?'

'I don't go to a psychiatrist,' she said, 'I come to you, because my case is outside of all lines and rules, and because you are famous in your profession for the discovery of mysteries in disease. Are you satisfied?'

He was more than satisfied. She was correctly informed as to his professional position.

'I am at your disposal,' he answered. 'Let me try if I can find out what is the matter with you.'

He put his medical questions. She answered promptly and plainly. The strange lady was, mentally and physically, in excellent health. Not satisfied with questions, he carefully examined the great organs of life. Neither his hand nor his stethoscope could discover anything wrong.

‘I can find nothing the matter with you,’ he said. ‘I can’t even explain the extraordinary pallor of your complexion. You completely puzzle me.’

‘The pallor of my complexion is nothing,’ she answered a little impatiently. ‘In my youth I escaped from death by poisoning. That’s why my skin is so delicate. But that is not important. I wanted your opinion. I believed in you, and you have disappointed me.’

Her head dropped on her breast.

The Doctor’s professional pride was a little hurt.

‘I can help you,’ he remarked, ‘if you choose to help me.’

She looked up.

‘Speak plainly,’ she said. ‘How can I help you?’

‘Plainly, madam, you come to me as an enigma. My art can do much, but not all. For example, something occurred — something quite unconnected with the state of your bodily health — to frighten you about yourself. Is that true?’

She clasped her hands in her lap.

‘That is true!’ she said eagerly. ‘I begin to believe in you again.’

She rose.

‘I will tell you,’ she said. ‘But, I’ll mention no names!’

‘There is no need to mention names. The facts are all I want.’

‘The facts are nothing,’ she said. ‘I have only my own impressions to confess. I will do my best to content you — I will begin with the facts that you want.’

She sat down again and began her strange and wild confession.

CHAPTER II

‘It is one fact, sir, that I am a widow,’ she said. ‘It is another fact, that I am going to be married again.’

There she paused, and smiled. Doctor Wybrow was not favourably impressed by her smile — there was something at once sad and cruel in it. It came slowly, and it

went away suddenly. He began to doubt whether he was wise to listen to her.

The lady went on.

‘My approaching marriage,’ she said, ‘has one embarrassing circumstance connected with it. The gentleman whose wife I am to be, was engaged to another lady when he met with me, abroad: that lady was of his own blood and family, and related to him as his cousin. I have innocently robbed her of her lover, and destroyed her prospects in life. Innocently, I say — because he told me nothing of his engagement. When we next met in England, he told me the truth. I was naturally indignant. He showed me a letter from the lady herself, she was releasing him from his engagement. A noble letter! I cried over it. But the firmness of it — without anger, without a word of reproach — left him no hope. He appealed to my compassion; he appealed to his love for me. You know what women are. I said: yes! In a week more (I tremble as I think of it) we are to be married.’

She really trembled — she paused, before she could go on. The Doctor was waiting for more facts.

‘Excuse me, but I have suffering persons waiting to see me,’ he said. ‘The sooner you can come to the point, the better for my patients and for me.’

The strange smile showed itself again on the lady’s lips.

‘Every word I say is to the point,’ she answered. ‘You will see it yourself.’

She resumed her narrative.

‘Yesterday I was among the visitors at a party. A lady came in late. She took a chair near me; and we were presented to each other. I knew her by name, as she knew me. It was the woman whom I had robbed of her lover, the woman who had written the noble letter. Now listen! I admired her. This is very important, as you will see. On her side, I think that she understood I was not to blame. Now, explain to me, if you can, why, when I rose and met that woman’s eyes, I turned cold from head to foot, and shuddered, and shivered, and knew what a deadly panic of fear was, for the first time in my life.’

‘Was there anything remarkable in the lady’s personal appearance?’ the Doctor asked.

‘Nothing!’ was the vehement reply. ‘Here is the true description of her: the ordinary English lady; the clear cold blue eyes, the fine rosy complexion, the inanimately polite manner, the large good-humoured mouth, the too plump cheeks and chin: these, and nothing more.’

‘Was there anything strange in her expression, when you first looked at her?’

‘There was natural curiosity to see me; and perhaps some astonishment also. But if I could get to the door, I would run out of the room, she frightened me so! I was not even able to stand up — I sank back in my chair; I stared at the calm blue eyes that were only looking at me with a gentle surprise. To say they affected me like the eyes of a serpent is to say nothing. I felt her soul in them. That woman is destined to be the evil genius of my life. She said, “I am afraid the heat of the room is too much for you; will you try my **smelling bottle**¹?” I heard those kind words; and I remember nothing else — I fainted. When I recovered my senses, the company had all gone; only the lady of the house was with me. For the moment I could say nothing to her. As soon I could speak, I implored her to tell me the whole truth about that woman. They had been her friend from her girlhood, they were like sisters. She knew her positively to be as good, as innocent, as the greatest saint that ever lived. But I felt an ordinary forewarning of danger in the presence of an enemy. I went next to the man whom I am to marry. I implored him to release me from my promise. He refused. I declared I would break my engagement. He showed me letters from his sisters, letters from his brothers, and his dear friends—all entreating him to think again before he made me his wife. All repeating **reports of me**² in Paris, Vienna, and London, which are vile lies. “If you refuse to marry me,” he said, “you admit that these reports are true.” What could I answer? He was plainly right:

¹ **smelling bottle** — бутылочка с нюхательной солью

² **reports of me** — слухи про меня

if I persisted in my refusal, the utter destruction of my reputation would be the result. The night has passed. I am here, with my conviction that innocent woman has a fatal influence over my life. I am here with the question. Sir, what am I — a demon who has seen the avenging angel? or only a poor mad woman with a deranged mind?’

Doctor Wybrow rose from his chair. He was strongly and painfully impressed by what he had heard. The conviction of the woman’s wickedness forced itself on him. He tried vainly to think of her as a person with a morbidly sensitive imagination; the effort was beyond him.

‘I have already given you my opinion,’ he said. ‘As for the impressions you have confided to me, I can only say that your case is more spiritual than medical. Of course you can be sure: what you have said to me in this room will not pass out of it. Your confession is safe.’

‘Is that all?’ she asked.

‘That is all,’ he answered.

She put some money on the table.

‘Thank you, sir. There is your fee.’

With those words she rose. The Doctor turned away his head, he did not want to take anything from her.

‘Take it back; I don’t want my fee,’ he said.

She did not hear him. She said slowly to herself,

‘Let the end come. I submit.’

She drew her veil over her face, bowed to the Doctor, and left the room.

He rang the bell, and followed her into the hall. As the servant closed the door, a sudden impulse of curiosity sprang up in the Doctor’s mind. He said to the servant, ‘Follow her, and find out her name.’

The servant took his hat and hurried into the street.

The Doctor went back to the consulting-room. Had the woman left an infection of wickedness in the house? He ran out into the hall again, and opened the door. The servant had disappeared; it was too late to call him back. But one refuge was now open to him — the refuge of work. He got into his carriage and went his rounds among his patients.

In the evening the servant reported the result of his errand.

‘The lady’s name is the Countess Narona. She lives at—’

The Doctor entered his consulting-room. The fee still lay on the table. He sealed it up in an envelope and **addressed it to the ‘Poor-box’**¹. The servant asked,

‘Do you dine at home today, sir?’

After a moment’s hesitation he said, ‘No: I’ll dine at the club.’

Doctor Wybrow wanted to hear what the world said of the Countess Narona.

CHAPTER III

Doctor Wybrow lit his cigar, and looked round him at his brethren. The room was well filled. When he inquired if anybody knew the Countess Narona, everybody was astonished. What an absurd question! Every one knew the Countess Narona. An adventuress with a European reputation of the blackest possible colour — such was the general description of the woman with the deathlike complexion and the glittering eyes. It was doubtful whether she was really, what she called herself, a **Dalmatian lady**². It was doubtful whether she had ever been married to the Count whose widow she assumed to be. It was doubtful whether the man who accompanied her in her travels (under the name of Baron Rivar, and in the character of her brother) was her brother at all. Report pointed to the Baron as a gambler at every ‘table’ on the Continent. And his so-called sister had escaped from a famous trial for poisoning in Vienna. Moreover, she had been known in Milan as a spy. Her apartment in Paris was nothing less than a private gambling-house.

Only one member of the assembly in the smoking-room took the part of this woman. But the man was a

¹ **addressed it to the ‘Poor-box’** — написал на нём «В пользу бедных»

² **Dalmatian lady** — уроженка Далмации (области на северо-западе Балканского полуострова)

lawyer, and his interference was naturally attributed to the spirit of contradiction.

The Doctor inquired the name of the gentleman whom the Countess was going to marry.

His friends said that the Countess Narona had borrowed money in Homburg of Lord Montbarry, and **had then deluded him into making her a proposal of marriage**¹. The younger members of the club sent a waiter for **the 'Peerage'**²; and read aloud about the nobleman.

'Herbert John Westwick. First Baron Montbarry, of Montbarry, King's County, Ireland. Created a Peer for distinguished military services in India. Born, 1812. Forty-eight years old, at the present time. Not married. Will be married next week. Heir presumptive, his lordship's next brother, Stephen Robert, married to Ella, youngest daughter of the Reverend Silas Marden, Rector of Runnigate, and has three daughters. Younger brothers of his lordship, Francis and Henry, unmarried. Sisters of his lordship, Lady Barville, married to Sir Theodore Barville, Bart.; and Anne, widow of the late Peter Norbury, Esq., of Norbury Cross. Three brothers Westwick, Stephen, Francis, and Henry; and two sisters, Lady Barville and Mrs. Norbury. Not one of the five will be present at the marriage, Doctor; and not one of the five will leave a stone unturned to stop it, if the Countess will only give them a chance. Add to these hostile members of the family another offended relative not mentioned in the 'Peerage,' a young lady—'

A sudden outburst of protest stopped the disclosure.

'Don't mention the poor girl's name. There is but one excuse for Montbarry — he is either a madman or a fool.'

The Doctor spoke confidentially to his neighbour and discovered that the lady was deserted by Lord Montbarry. Her name was Agnes Lockwood.

¹ **had then deluded him into making her a proposal of marriage** — обманом вынудила потом предложение руки и сердца

² **the 'Peerage'** — «Книга пэров»

Soon a member of the club entered the smoking-room. His appearance instantly produced a dead silence. Doctor Wybrow's neighbour whispered to him, 'Montbarry's brother — Henry Westwick!'

The new-comer looked said, with a bitter smile, 'You are all talking of my brother. **Don't mind me**¹. I despise him. Go on, gentlemen — go on!'

But the lawyer undertook the defence of the Countess. 'I stand alone in my opinion,' he said, 'and I am not ashamed of it. Why can't the Countess Narona be Lord Montbarry's wife? Who can say she has a mercenary motive?'

Montbarry's brother turned sharply on the speaker.

'I say it!' he answered.

'I believe I am right,' the lawyer rejoined, 'his lordship's income is not more than sufficient to support his station in life. And it is an income derived almost entirely from landed property in Ireland, **every acre of which is entailed**².'

Montbarry's brother had no objection.

'If his lordship dies first,' the lawyer proceeded, 'if he leaves her a widow, four hundred pounds a year — is all that he can leave to the Countess. I know that.'

'Four hundred a year is not all,' was the reply to this. 'My brother has insured his life for ten thousand pounds.'

This announcement produced a strong sensation. Men looked at each other, and repeated the words, 'Ten thousand pounds!'

After that, the Doctor went home. But his curiosity about the Countess was not satisfied. He was wondering whether Lord Montbarry's family would stop the marriage after all. And more than this, he wanted to see the man himself. Every day he visited the club to hear some news.

Nothing happened. The Countess's position was secure; Montbarry's resolution to be her husband was unshaken. They were both Roman Catholics, and they were to be married at the chapel in Spanish Place.

¹ **Don't mind me.** — Не обращайтесь на меня внимания.

² **every acre of which is entailed** — каждый акр (той земли) — неотчуждаемая собственность

On the day of the wedding, the Doctor went out to see the marriage. The wedding was strictly private. A carriage stood at the church door; a few people, mostly of the lower class, and mostly old women, were near. Here and there Doctor Wybrow detected the faces of some of his brethren of the club. They were attracted by curiosity, like himself. Four persons only stood before the altar — the bride and bridegroom and their two witnesses. One of these last was an elderly woman; the other was undoubtedly her brother, Baron Rivar.

Lord Montbarry was a middle-aged military man. Nothing remarkable. Baron Rivar had moustache, bold eyes, and curling hair. And he was not in the least like his sister.

The priest was only a harmless, humble-looking old man.

From time to time the Doctor glanced round at the door or up at the galleries, anticipating the appearance of some protesting stranger. Nothing occurred — nothing extraordinary, nothing dramatic.

The married couple walked together down the nave to the door. Doctor Wybrow drew back as

they approached. To his confusion and surprise, the Countess discovered him. He heard her say to her husband, 'One moment; I see a friend.' Lord Montbarry bowed and waited. She stepped up to the Doctor, took his hand, and wrung it hard.

'One step more, you see, on the way to the end!' She whispered those strange words, and returned to her husband.

Then Lord and Lady Montbarry stepped into their carriage, and drove away.

Outside the church door stood the three or four members of the club. They began with the Baron.

'Damned ill-looking rascal!'

They went on with Montbarry.

'Is he going to take that horrid woman with him to Ireland?'

'No! They know about Agnes Lockwood.'

'Well, but where is he going?'