A Blot in the 'Scutcheon

by Robert Browning

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Transcriber's comments on the preparation of this e-text:

Closing brackets i.e. "]" have been added to some of the stage directions.

Leading blanks are reproduced from the printed text. Eg.:

GUENDOLEN. Where are you taking me? TRESHAM. He fell just here.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

ROBERT BROWNING stands, in respect to his origin and his career, in marked contrast to the two aristocratic poets beside whose dramas his "Blot in the 'Scutcheon" is here printed. His father was a bank clerk and a dissenter at a time when dissent meant exclusion from Society; the poet went neither to one of the great public schools nor to Oxford or Cambridge; and no breath of scandal touched his name. Born in London in 1812, he was educated largely by private tutors, and spent two years at London University, but the influence of his father, a man of wide reading and cultivated tastes, was probably the most important element in his early training. He drew well, was something of a musician, and wrote verses from an early age, though it was the accidental reading of a volume of Shelley which first kindled his real inspiration. This indebtedness is beautifully acknowledged in his first published poem, "Pauline" (1833).

Apart from frequent visits to Italy, there is little of incident to chronicle in

Browning's life, with the one great exception of his more than fortunate marriage in 1846 to Elizabeth Barrett, the greatest of English poetesses.

Browning's dramatic period extended from 1835 to the time of his marriage, and produced some nine plays, not all of which, however, were intended for the stage. "Paracelsus," the first of the series, has been fairly described as a "conversational drama," and "Pippa Passes," though it has been staged, is essentially a poem to read. The historical tragedy of "Strafford" has been impressively performed, but "King Victor and King Charles," "The Return of the Druses," "Colombe's Birthday," "A Soul's Tragedy," and "Luria," while interesting in many ways, can hardly be regarded as successful stage-plays. "A Blot in the 'Scutcheon" was performed at Drury Lane, but its chances of a successful run were spoiled by the jealousy of Macready, the manager.

The main cause of Browning's weakness as a playwright lay in the fact that he was so much more interested in psychology than in action. But in the present tragedy this defect is less prominent than usual, and in spite of flaws in construction, it reaches a high pitch of emotional intensity, the characters are drawn with vividness, and the lines are rich in poetry.

A BLOT IN THE 'SCUTCHEON

A TRAGEDY

(1843)

DRAMATIS PERSONAE MILDRED TRESHAM. GUENDOLEN TRESHAM. THOROLD, Earl Tresham. AUSTIN TRESHAM. HENRY, Earl Mertoun. GERARD, and other retainers of Lord Tresham. Time, 17—

ACT I

SCENE I.—The Interior of a Lodge in Lord Tresham's Park. Many Retainers crowded at the window, supposed to command a view of the entrance to his Mansion. GERARD, the Warrener, his back to a table on which are flagons, etc. FIRST RETAINER. Ay, do! push, friends, and then you'll push down me! —What for? Does any hear a runner's foot Or a steed's trample or a coach-wheel's cry? Is the Earl come or his least poursuivant? But there's no breeding in a man of you Save Gerard yonder: here's a half-place yet, Old Gerard! GERARD. Save your courtesies, my friend. Here is my place. SECOND RETAINER. Now, Gerard, out with it! What makes you sullen, this of all the days I' the year? To-day that young rich bountiful Handsome Earl Mertoun, whom alone they match With our Lord Tresham through the country-side, Is coming here in utmost bravery To ask our master's sister's hand? GERARD. What then? SECOND RETAINER. What then? Why, you, she speaks to, if she meets Your worship, smiles on as you hold apart The boughs to let her through her forest walks, You, always favourite for your no-deserts, You've heard, these three days, how Earl Mertoun sues To lay his heart and house and broad lands too At Lady Mildred's feet: and while we squeeze Ourselves into a mousehole lest we miss One congee of the least page in his train, You sit o' one side—"there's the Earl," say I— "What then?" say you! THIRD RETAINER. I'll wager he has let Both swans he tamed for Lady Mildred swim Over the falls and gain the river! GERARD. Ralph, Is not to-morrow my inspecting-day For you and for your hawks? FOURTH RETAINER. Let Gerard be! He's coarse-grained, like his carved black cross-bow stock. Ha, look now, while we squabble with him, look! Well done, now—is not this beginning, now, To purpose? FIRST RETAINER. Our retainers look as fine— That's comfort. Lord, how Richard holds himself With his white staff! Will not a knave behind Prick him upright? FOURTH RETAINER. He's only bowing, fool! The Earl's man bent us lower by this much. FIRST RETAINER. That's comfort.

Here's a very cavalcade! THIRD RETAINER. I don't see wherefore Richard, and his troop Of silk and silver varlets there, should find Their perfumed selves so indispensable On high days, holidays! Would it so disgrace Our family, if I, for instance, stood— In my right hand a cast of Swedish hawks, A leash of greyhounds in my left?— GERARD. —With Hugh The logman for supporter, in his right The bill-hook, in his left the brushwood-shears! THIRD RETAINER. Out on you, crab! What next, what next? The Earl! FIRST RETAINER. Oh Walter, groom, our horses, do they match The Earl's? Alas, that first pair of the six— They paw the ground—Ah Walter! and that brute Just on his haunches by the wheel! SIXTH RETAINER. Ay—ay! You, Philip, are a special hand, I hear, At soups and sauces: what's a horse to you? D'ye mark that beast they've slid into the midst So cunningly?—then, Philip, mark this further; No leg has he to stand on! FIRST RETAINER. No? that's comfort. SECOND RETAINER. Peace, Cook! The Earl descends. Well, Gerard, see The Earl at least! Come, there's a proper man, I hope! Why, Ralph, no falcon, Pole or Swede, Has got a starrier eye. THIRD RETAINER. His eyes are blue: But leave my hawks alone! FOURTH RETAINER. So young, and yet So tall and shapely! FIFTH RETAINER. Here's Lord Tresham's self! There now—there's what a nobleman should be! He's older, graver, loftier, he's more like A House's head. SECOND RETAINER. But you'd not have a boy —And what's the Earl beside?—possess too soon That stateliness? FIRST RETAINER. Our master takes his hand— Richard and his white staff are on the move— Back fall our people—(tsh!—there's Timothy Sure to get tangled in his ribbon-ties, And Peter's cursed rosette's a-coming off!) —At last I see our lord's back and his friend's; And the whole beautiful bright company Close round them—in they go! [Jumping down from the window-bench, and making for the table and its jugs.] Good health, long life, Great joy to our Lord Tresham and his House! SIXTH RETAINER. My father drove his father first to court, After his marriage-day—ay, did he! SECOND RETAINER. God bless Lord Tresham, Lady Mildred, and the Earl! Here, Gerard,

reach your beaker! GERARD. Drink, my boys! Don't mind me—all's not right about me—drink! SECOND RETAINER [aside]. He's vexed, now, that he let the show escape! [To GERARD.] Remember that the Earl returns this way. GERARD. That way? SECOND RETAINER. Just so. GERARD. Then my way's here. [Goes.] SECOND RETAINER. Old Gerard Will die soon—mind, I said it! He was used To care about the pitifullest thing That touched the House's honour, not an eye But his could see wherein: and on a cause Of scarce a quarter this importance, Gerard Fairly had fretted flesh and bone away In cares that this was right, nor that was wrong, Such point decorous, and such square by rule— He knew such niceties, no herald more: And now—you see his humour: die he will! SECOND RETAINER. God help him! Who's for the great servants' hall To hear what's going on inside! They'd follow Lord Tresham into the saloon. THIRD RETAINER. I!— FOURTH RETAINER. I!— Leave Frank alone for catching, at the door, Some hint of how the parley goes inside! Prosperity to the great House once more! Here's the last drop! FIRST RETAINER. Have at you! Boys, hurrah!

SCENE II.—A Saloon in the Mansion Enter LORD TRESHAM, LORD MERTOUN, AUSTIN, and GUENDOLEN TRESHAM. I welcome you, Lord Mertoun, yet once more, To this ancestral roof of mine. Your name —Noble among the noblest in itself, Yet taking in your person, fame avers, New price and lustre,—(as that gem you wear, Transmitted from a hundred knightly breasts, Fresh chased and set and fixed by its last lord, Seems to re-kindle at the core)—your name Would win you welcome!— MERTOUN. Thanks! TRESHAM. —But add to that, The worthiness and grace and dignity Of your proposal for uniting both Our Houses even closer than respect Unites them now—add these, and you must grant One favour more, nor that the least,—to think The welcome I should give;—'tis given! My lord, My only brother, Austin: he's the king's. Our cousin, Lady Guendolen—betrothed To Austin: all are yours. MERTOUN. I thank you—less For the expressed commendings which your seal, And only that, authenticates—forbids

My putting from me... to my heart I take Your praise... but praise less claims my gratitude, Than the indulgent insight it implies Of what must needs be uppermost with one Who comes, like me, with the bare leave to ask, In weighed and measured unimpassioned words, A gift, which, if as calmly 'tis denied, He must withdraw, content upon his cheek, Despair within his soul. That I dare ask Firmly, near boldly, near with confidence That gift, I have to thank you. Yes, Lord Tresham, I love your sister—as you'd have one love That lady... oh more, more I love her! Wealth, Rank, all the world thinks me, they're yours, you know, To hold or part with, at your choice—but grant My true self, me without a rood of land, A piece of gold, a name of yesterday, Grant me that lady, and you... Death or life? GUENDOLEN. [apart to AUSTIN]. Why, this is loving, Austin! AUSTIN. He's so young! GUENDOLEN. Young? Old enough, I think, to half surmise He never had obtained an entrance here, Were all this fear and trembling needed. AUSTIN. Hush! He reddens. GUENDOLEN. Mark him, Austin; that's true love! Ours must begin again. TRESHAM. We'll sit, my lord. Ever with best desert goes diffidence. I may speak plainly nor be misconceived That I am wholly satisfied with you On this occasion, when a falcon's eye Were dull compared with mine to search out faults, Is somewhat. Mildred's hand is hers to give Or to refuse. MERTOUN. But you, you grant my suit? I have your word if hers? TRESHAM. My best of words If hers encourage you. I trust it will. Have you seen Lady Mildred, by the way? MERTOUN. I... I... our two demesnes, remember, touch, I have beer used to wander carelessly After my stricken game: the heron roused Deep in my woods, has trailed its broken wing Thro' thicks and glades a mile in yours,—or else Some eyass ill-reclaimed has taken flight And lured me after her from tree to tree, I marked not whither. I have come upon The lady's wondrous beauty unaware, And—and then... I have seen her. GUENDOLEN [aside to AUSTIN]. Note that mode Of faltering out that, when a lady passed, He, having eyes, did see her! You had said— "On such a day I scanned her, head to foot; Observed a red, where red should not have been,

Outside her elbow; but was pleased enough Upon the whole." Let such irreverent talk Be lessoned for the future! TRESHAM. What's to say May be said briefly. She has never known A mother's care; I stand for father too. Her beauty is not strange to you, it seems— You cannot know the good and tender heart, Its girl's trust and its woman's constancy, How pure yet passionate, how calm yet kind, How grave yet joyous, how reserved yet free As light where friends are—how imbued with lore The world most prizes, yet the simplest, yet The... one might know I talked of Mildred—thus We brothers talk! MERTOUN. I thank you. TRESHAM. In a word, Control's not for this lady; but her wish To please me outstrips in its subtlety My power of being pleased: herself creates The want she means to satisfy. My heart Prefers your suit to her as 'twere its own. Can I say more? MERTOUN. No more—thanks, thanks—no more! TRESHAM. This matter then discussed... MERTOUN. —We'll waste no breath On aught less precious. I'm beneath the roof Which holds her: while I thought of that, my speech To you would wander—as it must not do, Since as you favour me I stand or fall. I pray you suffer that I take my leave! TRESHAM. With less regret 'tis suffered, that again We meet, I hope, so shortly. MERTOUN. We? again?— Ah yes, forgive me—when shall... you will crown Your goodness by forthwith apprising me When... if... the lady will appoint a day For me to wait on you—and her. TRESHAM. So soon As I am made acquainted with her thoughts On your proposal—howsoe'er they lean— A messenger shall bring you the result. MERTOUN. You cannot bind me more to you, my lord. Farewell till we renew... I trust, renew A converse ne'er to disunite again. TRESHAM. So may it prove! MERTOUN. You, lady, you, sir, take My humble salutation! GUENDOLEN and AUSTIN. Thanks! TRESHAM. Within there! [Servants enter. TRESHAM conducts MERTOUN to the door. Meantime AUSTIN remarks,] Well, Here I have an advantage of the Earl, Confess now! I'd not think that all was safe Because my lady's brother stood my friend! Why, he makes sure of her—"do you say yes— She'll not say, no,"—what comes it to beside? I should have

prayed the brother, "speak this speech, For Heaven's sake urge this on her—put in this— Forget not, as you'd save me, t'other thing,— Then set down what she says, and how she looks, And if she smiles, and" (in an under breath) "Only let her accept me, and do you And all the world refuse me, if you dare!" GUENDOLEN. That way you'd take, friend Austin? What a shame I was your cousin, tamely from the first Your bride, and all this fervour's run to waste! Do you know you speak sensibly to-day? The Earl's a fool. AUSTIN. Here's Thorold. Tell him so! TRESHAM [returning]. Now, voices, voices! 'St! the lady's first! How seems he?—seems he not... come, faith give fraud The mercy-stroke whenever they engage! Down with fraud, up with faith! How seems the Earl? A name! a blazon! if you knew their worth, As you will never! come—the Earl? GUENDOLEN. He's young. TRESHAM. What's she? an infant save in heart and brain. Young! Mildred is fourteen, remark! And you... Austin, how old is she? GUENDOLEN. There's tact for you! I meant that being young was good excuse If one should tax him... TRESHAM. Well? GUENDOLEN. —With lacking wit. TRESHAM. He lacked wit? Where might he lack wit, so please you? GUENDOLEN. In standing straighter than the steward's rod And making you the tiresomest harangue, Instead of slipping over to my side And softly whispering in my ear, "Sweet lady, Your cousin there will do me detriment He little dreams of: he's absorbed, I see, In my old name and fame—be sure he'll leave My Mildred, when his best account of me Is ended, in full confidence I wear My grandsire's periwig down either cheek. I'm lost unless your gentleness vouchsafes"... TRESHAM... "To give a best of best accounts, yourself, Of me and my demerits." You are right! He should have said what now I say for him. Yon golden creature, will you help us all? Here's Austin means to vouch for much, but you —You are... what Austin only knows! Come up, All three of us: she's in the library No doubt, for the day's wearing fast. Precede! GUENDOLEN. Austin, how we must—! TRESHAM. Must what? Must speak truth, Malignant tongue! Detect one fault in him! I challenge you! GUENDOLEN. Witchcraft's a fault in him,

For you're bewitched. TRESHAM. What's urgent we obtain Is, that she soon receive him—say, to-morrow—, Next day at furthest. GUENDOLEN. Ne'er instruct me! TRESHAM. Come! —He's out of your good graces, since forsooth, He stood not as he'd carry us by storm With his perfections! You're for the composed Manly assured becoming confidence! —Get her to say, "to-morrow," and I'll give you... I'll give you black Urganda, to be spoiled With petting and snail-paces. Will you? Come!

SCENE III. —MILDRED'S Chamber. A Painted Window overlooks the Park MILDRED and GUENDOLEN GUENDOLEN. Now, Mildred, spare those pains. I have not left Our talkers in the library, and climbed The wearisome ascent to this your bower In company with you,—I have not dared... Nay, worked such prodigies as sparing you Lord Mertoun's pedigree before the flood, Which Thorold seemed in very act to tell —Or bringing Austin to pluck up that most Firm-rooted heresy—your suitor's eyes, He would maintain, were grey instead of blue— I think I brought him to contrition!—Well, I have not done such things, (all to deserve A minute's quiet cousin's talk with you,) To be dismissed so coolly. MILDRED. Guendolen! What have I done? what could suggest... GUENDOLEN. There, there! Do I not comprehend you'd be alone To throw those testimonies in a heap, Thorold's enlargings, Austin's brevities, With that poor silly heartless Guendolen's Ill-time misplaced attempted smartnesses— And sift their sense out? now, I come to spare you Nearly a whole night's labour. Ask and have! Demand, he answered! Lack I ears and eyes? Am I perplexed which side of the rock-table The Conqueror dined on when he landed first, Lord Mertoun's ancestor was bidden take— The bow-hand or the arrow-hand's great meed? Mildred, the Earl has soft blue eyes! MILDRED. My brother— Did he... you said that he received him well? GUENDOLEN. If I said only "well" I said not much. Oh, stay—which brother? MILDRED. Thorold! who—Who else? GUENDOLEN. Thorold (a secret) is too proud by half,— Nay, hear me out—with us he's even gentler Than we are with our birds. Of this great House The least retainer that e'er caught his glance Would die for him, real

dying—no mere talk: And in the world, the court, if men would cite The perfect spirit of honour, Thorold's name Rises of its clear nature to their lips. But he should take men's homage, trust in it, And care no more about what drew it down. He has desert, and that, acknowledgment; Is he content? MILDRED. You wrong him, Guendolen. GUENDOLEN. He's proud, confess; so proud with brooding o'er The light of his interminable line, An ancestry with men all paladins, And women all... MILDRED. Dear Guendolen, 'tis late! When yonder purple pane the climbing moon Pierces, I know 'tis midnight. GUENDOLEN. Well, that Thorold Should rise up from such musings, and receive One come audaciously to graft himself Into this peerless stock, yet find no flaw, No slightest spot in such an one... MILDRED. Who finds A spot in Mertoun? GUENDOLEN. Not your brother; therefore, Not the whole world. MILDRED. I am weary, Guendolen. Bear with me! GUENDOLEN. I am foolish. MILDRED. Oh no, kind! But I would rest. GUENDOLEN. Good night and rest to you! I said how gracefully his mantle lay Beneath the rings of his light hair? MILDRED. Brown hair. GUENDOLEN. Brown? why, it IS brown: how could you know that? MILDRED. How? did not you—Oh, Austin 'twas, declared His hair was light, not brown—my head!—and look, The moon-beam purpling the dark chamber! Sweet, Good night! GUENDOLEN. Forgive me—sleep the soundlier for me! [Going, she turns suddenly.] Mildred! Perdition! all's discovered! Thorold finds —That the Earl's greatest of all grandmothers Was grander daughter still—to that fair dame Whose garter slipped down at the famous dance! [Goes.] MILDRED. Is she—can she be really gone at last? My heart! I shall not reach the window. Needs Must I have sinned much, so to suffer. [She lifts the small lamp which is suspended before the Virgin's image in the window, and places it by the purple pane.] There! [She returns to the seat in front.] Mildred and Mertoun! Mildred, with consent Of all the world and Thorold, Mertoun's bride! Too late! 'Tis sweet to think of, sweeter still To hope for, that this blessed end soothes up The curse of the beginning; but I know It comes too late: 'twill sweetest be of all To dream my soul away and die upon. [A

noise without.] The voice! Oh why, why glided sin the snake Into the paradise Heaven meant us both? [The window opens softly. A low voice sings.] There's a woman like a dew-drop, she's so purer than the purest; And her noble heart's the noblest, yes, and her sure faith's the surest: And her eyes are dark and humid, like the depth on depth of lustre Hid i' the harebell, while her tresses, sunnier than the wild-grape cluster, Gush in golden tinted plenty down her neck's rose-misted marble: Then her voice's music... call it the well's bubbling, the bird's warble! [A figure wrapped in a mantle appears at the window.] And this woman says, "My days were sunless and my nights were moonless, Parched the pleasant April herbage, and the lark's heart's outbreak tuneless, If you loved me not!" And I who—(ah, for words of flame!) adore her, Who am mad to lay my spirit prostrate palpably before her— [He enters, approaches her seat, and bends over her.] I may enter at her portal soon, as now her lattice takes me, And by noontide as by midnight make her mine, as hers she makes me! [The EARL throws off his slouched hat and long cloak.] My very heart sings, so I sing, Beloved! MILDRED. Sit, Henry—do not take my hand! MERTOUN. 'Tis mine. The meeting that appalled us both so much Is ended. MILDRED. What begins now? MERTOUN. Happiness Such as the world contains not. MILDRED. That is it. Our happiness would, as you say, exceed The whole world's best of blisses: we—do we Deserve that? Utter to your soul, what mine Long since, Beloved, has grown used to hear, Like a death-knell, so much regarded once, And so familiar now; this will not be! MERTOUN. Oh, Mildred, have I met your brother's face? Compelled myself—if not to speak untruth, Yet to disguise, to shun, to put aside The truth, as—what had e'er prevailed on me Save you to venture? Have I gained at last Your brother, the one scarer of your dreams, And waking thoughts' sole apprehension too? Does a new life, like a young sunrise, break On the strange unrest of our night, confused With rain and stormy flaw—and will you see No dripping blossoms, no fire-tinted drops On each live spray, no vapour steaming up, And no expressless glory in the East? When I am by you, to be ever by you, When I

have won you and may worship you, Oh, Mildred, can you say "this will not be"? MILDRED. Sin has surprised us, so will punishment. MERTOUN. No—me alone, who sinned alone! MILDRED. The night You likened our past life to—was it storm Throughout to you then, Henry? MERTOUN. Of your life I spoke—what am I, what my life, to waste A thought about when you are by me?—you It was, I said my folly called the storm And pulled the night upon. 'Twas day with me— Perpetual dawn with me. MILDRED. Come what, come will, You have been happy: take my hand! MERTOUN [after a pause]. How good Your brother is! I figured him a cold— Shall I say, haughty man? MILDRED. They told me all. I know all. MERTOUN. It will soon be over. MILDRED. Over? Oh, what is over? what must I live through And say, "'tis over"? Is our meeting over? Have I received in presence of them all The partner of my guilty love—with brow Trying to seem a maiden's brow—with lips Which make believe that when they strive to form Replies to you and tremble as they strive, It is the nearest ever they approached A stranger's... Henry, yours that stranger's... lip— With cheek that looks a virgin's, and that is... Ah God, some prodigy of thine will stop This planned piece of deliberate wickedness In its birth even! some fierce leprous spot Will mar the brow's dissimulating! I Shall murmur no smooth speeches got by heart, But, frenzied, pour forth all our woeful story, The love, the shame, and the despair—with them Round me aghast as round some cursed fount That should spirt water, and spouts blood. I'll not ...Henry, you do not wish that I should draw This vengeance down? I'll not affect a grace That's gone from me—gone once, and gone for ever! MERTOUN. Mildred, my honour is your own. I'll share Disgrace I cannot suffer by myself. A word informs your brother I retract This morning's offer; time will yet bring forth Some better way of saving both of us. MILDRED. I'll meet their faces, Henry! MERTOUN. When? to-morrow! Get done with it! MILDRED. Oh, Henry, not to-morrow! Next day! I never shall prepare my words And looks and gestures sooner.—How you must Despise me! MERTOUN. Mildred, break it if you choose, A heart the love of you uplifted—still Uplifts, thro'

this protracted agony, To heaven! but Mildred, answer me,—first pace The chamber with me—once again—now, say Calmly the part, the... what it is of me You see contempt (for you did say contempt) —Contempt for you in! I would pluck it off And cast it from me!—but no—no, you'll not Repeat that?—will you, Mildred, repeat that? MILDRED. Dear Henry! MERTOUN. I was scarce a boy—e'en now What am I more? And you were infantine When first I met you; why, your hair fell loose On either side! My fool's-cheek reddens now Only in the recalling how it burned That morn to see the shape of many a dream —You know we boys are prodigal of charms To her we dream of—I had heard of one, Had dreamed of her, and I was close to her, Might speak to her, might live and die her own, Who knew? I spoke. Oh, Mildred, feel you not That now, while I remember every glance Of yours, each word of yours, with power to test And weigh them in the diamond scales of pride, Resolved the treasure of a first and last Heart's love shall have been bartered at its worth, —That now I think upon your purity And utter ignorance of guilt—your own Or other's guilt—the girlish undisguised Delight at a strange novel prize—(I talk A silly language, but interpret, you!) If I, with fancy at its full, and reason Scarce in its germ, enjoined you secrecy, If you had pity on my passion, pity On my protested sickness of the soul To sit beside you, hear you breathe, and watch Your eyelids and the eyes beneath—if you Accorded gifts and knew not they were gifts— If I grew mad at last with enterprise And must behold my beauty in her bower Or perish—(I was ignorant of even My own desires—what then were you?) if sorrow— Sin—if the end came—must I now renounce My reason, blind myself to light, say truth Is false and lie to God and my own soul? Contempt were all of this! MILDRED. Do you believe... Or, Henry, I'll not wrong you—you believe That I was ignorant. I scarce grieve o'er The past. We'll love on; you will love me still. MERTOUN. Oh, to love less what one has injured! Dove, Whose pinion I have rashly hurt, my breast— Shall my heart's warmth not nurse thee into strength? Flower I have crushed, shall I not care for thee? Bloom o'er my crest, my fight-mark

and device! Mildred, I love you and you love me. MILDRED. Go! Be that your last word. I shall sleep to-night. MERTOUN. This is not our last meeting? MILDRED. One night more. MERTOUN. And then—think, then! MILDRED. Then, no sweet courtship-days, No dawning consciousness of love for us, No strange and palpitating births of sense From words and looks, no innocent fears and hopes, Reserves and confidences: morning's over! MERTOUN. How else should love's perfected noontide follow? All the dawn promised shall the day perform. MILDRED. So may it be! but— You are cautious, Love? Are sure that unobserved you scaled the walls? MERTOUN. Oh, trust me! Then our final meeting's fixed To-morrow night? MILDRED. Farewell! stay, Henry... wherefore? His foot is on the yew-tree bough; the turf Receives him: now the moonlight as he runs Embraces him—but he must go—is gone. Ah, once again he turns—thanks, thanks, my Love! He's gone. Oh, I'll believe him every word! I was so young, I loved him so, I had No mother, God forgot me, and I fell. There may be pardon yet: all's doubt beyond! Surely the bitterness of death is past.

ACT II

SCENE.—The Library Enter LORD TRESHAM, hastily TRESHAM. This way! In, Gerard, quick! [As GERARD enters, TRESHAM secures the door.] Now speak! or, wait— I'll bid you speak directly. [Seats himself.] Now repeat Firmly and circumstantially the tale You just now told me; it eludes me; either I did not listen, or the half is gone Away from me. How long have you lived here? Here in my house, your father kept our woods Before you? GERARD. —As his father did, my lord. I have been eating, sixty years almost, Your bread. TRESHAM. Yes, yes. You ever were of all The servants in my father's house, I know, The trusted one. You'll speak the truth. GERARD. I'll speak God's truth. Night after night... TRESHAM. Since when? GERARD. At least A month—each midnight has some man access To

Lady Mildred's chamber. TRESHAM. Tush, "access"— No wide words like "access" to me! GERARD. He runs Along the woodside, crosses to the South, Takes the left tree that ends the avenue... TRESHAM. The last great yew-tree? GERARD. You might stand upon The main boughs like a platform. Then he... TRESHAM. Quick! GERARD. Climbs up, and, where they lessen at the top, —I cannot see distinctly, but he throws, I think—for this I do not vouch—a line That reaches to the lady's casement— TRESHAM. —Which He enters not! Gerard, some wretched fool Dares pry into my sister's privacy! When such are young, it seems a precious thing To have approached,—to merely have approached, Got sight of the abode of her they set Their frantic thoughts upon. Ha does not enter? Gerard? GERARD. There is a lamp that's full i' the midst. Under a red square in the painted glass Of Lady Mildred's... TRESHAM. Leave that name out! Well? That lamp? GERARD. Is moved at midnight higher up To one pane—a small dark-blue pane; he waits For that among the boughs: at sight of that, I see him, plain as I see you, my lord, Open the lady's casement, enter there... TRESHAM. —And stay? GERARD. An hour, two hours. TRESHAM. And this you saw Once?—twice?—quick! GERARD. Twenty times. TRESHAM. And what brings you Under the yew-trees? GERARD. The first night I left My range so far, to track the stranger stag That broke the pale, I saw the man. TRESHAM. Yet sent No cross-bow shaft through the marauder? GERARD. But He came, my lord, the first time he was seen, In a great moonlight, light as any day, FROM Lady Mildred's chamber. TRESHAM [after a pause]. You have no cause —Who could have cause to do my sister wrong? GERARD. Oh, my lord, only once—let me this once Speak what is on my mind! Since first I noted All this, I've groaned as if a fiery net Plucked me this way and that—fire if I turned To her, fire if I turned to you, and fire If down I flung myself and strove to die. The lady could not have been seven years old When I was trusted to conduct her safe Through the deer-herd to stroke the snow-white fawn I brought to eat bread from her tiny hand Within a month. She ever had a smile To greet me with—she... if it could undo

What's done, to lop each limb from off this trunk... All that is foolish talk, not fit for you— I mean, I could not speak and bring her hurt For Heaven's compelling. But when I was fixed To hold my peace, each morsel of your food Eaten beneath your roof, my birth-place too, Choked me. I wish I had grown mad in doubts What it behoved me do. This morn it seemed Either I must confess to you or die: Now it is done, I seem the vilest worm That crawls, to have betrayed my lady. TRESHAM. No— No, Gerard! GERARD. Let me go! TRESHAM. A man, you say: What man? Young? Not a vulgar hind? What dress? GERARD. A slouched hat and a large dark foreign cloak Wraps his whole form; even his face is hid; But I should judge him young: no hind, be sure! TRESHAM. Why? GERARD. He is ever armed: his sword projects Beneath the cloak. TRESHAM. Gerard,—I will not say No word, no breath of this! GERARD. Thank, thanks, my lord! [Goes.] TRESHAM [paces the room. After a pause]. Oh, thoughts absurd!—as with some monstrous fact Which, when ill thoughts beset us, seems to give Merciful God that made the sun and stars, The waters and the green delights of earth, The lie! I apprehend the monstrous fact— Yet know the maker of all worlds is good, And yield my reason up, inadequate To reconcile what yet I do behold— Blasting my sense! There's cheerful day outside: This is my library, and this the chair My father used to sit in carelessly After his soldier-fashion, while I stood Between his knees to question him: and here Gerard our grey retainer,—as he says, Fed with our food, from sire to son, an age,— Has told a story—I am to believe! That Mildred... oh, no, no! both tales are true, Her pure cheek's story and the forester's! Would she, or could she, err—much less, confound All guilts of treachery, of craft, of... Heaven Keep me within its hand!—I will sit here Until thought settle and I see my course. Avert, oh God, only this woe from me! [As he sinks his head between his arms on the table, GUENDOLEN'S voice is heard at the door.] Lord Tresham! [She knocks.] Is Lord Tresham there? [TRESHAM, hastily turning, pulls down the first book above him and opens it.] TRESHAM. Come in! [She enters.] Ha, Guendolen!—good morning.

GUENDOLEN. Nothing more? TRESHAM. What should I say more? GUENDOLEN. Pleasant question! more? This more. Did I besiege poor Mildred's brain Last night till close on morning with "the Earl," "The Earl"—whose worth did I asseverate Till I am very fain to hope that... Thorold, What is all this? You are not well! TRESHAM. Who, I? You laugh at me. GUENDOLEN. Has what I'm fain to hope, Arrived then? Does that huge tome show some blot In the Earl's 'scutcheon come no longer back Than Arthur's time? TRESHAM. When left you Mildred's chamber? GUENDOLEN. Oh, late enough, I told you! The main thing To ask is, how I left her chamber,—sure, Content yourself, she'll grant this paragon Of Earls no such ungracious... TRESHAM. Send her here! GUENDOLEN. Thorold? TRESHAM. I mean—acquaint her, Guendolen, —But mildly! GUENDOLEN. Mildly? TRESHAM. Ah, you guessed aright! I am not well: there is no hiding it. But tell her I would see her at her leisure— That is, at once! here in the library! The passage in that old Italian book We hunted for so long is found, say, found— And if I let it slip again... you see, That she must come—and instantly! GUENDOLEN. I'll die Piecemeal, record that, if there have not gloomed Some blot i' the 'scutcheon! TRESHAM. Go! or, Guendolen, Be you at call,—With Austin, if you choose,— In the adjoining gallery! There go! [GUENDOLEN goes.] Another lesson to me! You might bid A child disguise his heart's sore, and conduct Some sly investigation point by point With a smooth brow, as well as bid me catch The inquisitorial cleverness some praise. If you had told me yesterday, "There's one You needs must circumvent and practise with, Entrap by policies, if you would worm The truth out: and that one is—Mildred!" There, There—reasoning is thrown away on it! Prove she's unchaste... why, you may after prove That she's a poisoner, traitress, what you will! Where I can comprehend nought, nought's to say, Or do, or think. Force on me but the first Abomination,—then outpour all plagues, And I shall ne'er make count of them. Enter MILDRED MILDRED. What book Is it I wanted, Thorold? Guendolen Thought you were pale; you are not pale. That book? That's Latin surely.

TRESHAM. Mildred, here's a line, (Don't lean on me: I'll English it for you) "Love conquers all things." What love conquers them? What love should you esteem—best love? MILDRED. True love. TRESHAM. I mean, and should have said, whose love is best Of all that love or that profess to love? MILDRED. The list's so long: there's father's, mother's, husband's... TRESHAM. Mildred, I do believe a brother's love For a sole sister must exceed them all. For see now, only see! there's no alloy Of earth that creeps into the perfect'st gold Of other loves—no gratitude to claim; You never gave her life, not even aught That keeps life—never tended her, instructed, Enriched her—so, your love can claim no right O'er her save pure love's claim: that's what I call Freedom from earthliness. You'll never hope To be such friends, for instance, she and you, As when you hunted cowslips in the woods, Or played together in the meadow hay. Oh yes—with age, respect comes, and your worth Is felt, there's growing sympathy of tastes, There's ripened friendship, there's confirmed esteem: —Much head these make against the newcomer! The startling apparition, the strange youth— Whom one half-hour's conversing with, or, say, Mere gazing at, shall change (beyond all change This Ovid ever sang about) your soul ...Her soul, that is,—the sister's soul! With her 'Twas winter yesterday; now, all is warmth, The green leaf's springing and the turtle's voice, "Arise and come away!" Come whither?—far Enough from the esteem, respect, and all The brother's somewhat insignificant Array of rights! All which he knows before, Has calculated on so long ago! I think such love, (apart from yours and mine,) Contented with its little term of life, Intending to retire betimes, aware How soon the background must be placed for it, —I think, am sure, a brother's love exceeds All the world's love in its unworldliness. MILDRED. What is this for? TRESHAM. This, Mildred, is it for! Or, no, I cannot go to it so soon! That's one of many points my haste left out— Each day, each hour throws forth its silk-slight film Between the being tied to you by birth, And you, until those slender threads compose A web that shrouds her daily life of hopes And fears and fancies, all her life, from yours: So close you live and yet so

far apart! And must I rend this web, tear up, break down The sweet and palpitating mystery That makes her sacred? You—for you I mean, Shall I speak, shall I not speak? MILDRED. Speak! TRESHAM. I will. Is there a story men could—any man Could tell of you, you would conceal from me? I'll never think there's falsehood on that lip. Say "There is no such story men could tell," And I'll believe you, though I disbelieve The world—the world of better men than I, And women such as I suppose you. Speak! [After a pause.] Not speak? Explain then! Clear it up then! Move Some of the miserable weight away That presses lower than the grave. Not speak? Some of the dead weight, Mildred! Ah, if I Could bring myself to plainly make their charge Against you! Must I, Mildred? Silent still? [After a pause.] Is there a gallant that has night by night Admittance to your chamber? [After a pause.] Then, his name! Till now, I only had a thought for you: But now,—his name! MILDRED. Thorold, do you devise Fit expiation for my guilt, if fit There be! 'Tis nought to say that I'll endure And bless you,—that my spirit yearns to purge Her stains off in the fierce renewing fire: But do not plunge me into other guilt! Oh, guilt enough! I cannot tell his name. TRESHAM. Then judge yourself! How should I act? Pronounce! MILDRED. Oh, Thorold, you must never tempt me thus! To die here in this chamber by that sword Would seem like punishment: so should I glide, Like an arch-cheat, into extremest bliss! 'Twere easily arranged for me: but you— What would become of you? TRESHAM. And what will now Become of me? I'll hide your shame and mine From every eye; the dead must heave their hearts Under the marble of our chapel-floor; They cannot rise and blast you. You may wed Your paramour above our mother's tomb; Our mother cannot move from 'neath your foot. We too will somehow wear this one day out: But with to-morrow hastens here—the Earl! The youth without suspicion. Face can come From Heaven and heart from... whence proceed such hearts? I have dispatched last night at your command A missive bidding him present himself To-morrow—here—thus much is said; the rest Is understood as if 'twere written down— "His suit finds favor in your eyes." Now

dictate This morning's letter that shall countermand Last night's—do dictate that! MILDRED. But, Thorold—if I will receive him as I said? TRESHAM. The Earl? MILDRED. I will receive him. TRESHAM [starting up]. Ho there! Guendolen! GUENDOLEN and AUSTIN enter And, Austin, you are welcome, too! Look there! The woman there! AUSTIN and GUENDOLEN. How? Mildred? TRESHAM. Mildred once! Now the receiver night by night, when sleep Blesses the inmates of her father's house, —I say, the soft sly wanton that receives Her guilt's accomplice 'neath this roof which holds You, Guendolen, you, Austin, and has held A thousand Treshams—never one like her! No lighter of the signal-lamp her quick Foul breath near quenches in hot eagerness To mix with breath as foul! no loosener O' the lattice, practised in the stealthy tread, The low voice and the noiseless come-and-go! Not one composer of the bacchant's mien Into—what you thought Mildred's, in a word! Know her! GUENDOLEN. Oh, Mildred, look to me, at least! Thorold—she's dead, I'd say, but that she stands Rigid as stone and whiter! TRESHAM. You have heard... GUENDOLEN. Too much! You must proceed no further. MILDRED. Yes— Proceed! All's truth. Go from me! TRESHAM. All is truth, She tells you! Well, you know, or ought to know, All this I would forgive in her. I'd con Each precept the harsh world enjoins, I'd take Our ancestors' stern verdicts one by one, I'd bind myself before then to exact The prescribed vengeance—and one word of hers, The sight of her, the bare least memory Of Mildred, my one sister, my heart's pride Above all prides, my all in all so long, Would scatter every trace of my resolve. What were it silently to waste away And see her waste away from this day forth, Two scathed things with leisure to repent, And grow acquainted with the grave, and die Tired out if not at peace, and be forgotten? It were not so impossible to bear. But this—that, fresh from last night's pledge renewed Of love with the successful gallant there, She calmly bids me help her to entice, Inveigle an unconscious trusting youth Who thinks her all that's chaste and good and pure, —Invites me to betray him... who so fit As honour's self to cover shame's arch-deed? —That she'll receive Lord

Mertoun—(her own phrase)— This, who could bear? Why, you have heard of thieves, Stabbers, the earth's disgrace, who yet have laughed, "Talk not to me of torture—I'll betray No comrade I've pledged faith to!"—you have heard Of wretched women—all but Mildreds—tied By wild illicit ties to losels vile You'd tempt them to forsake; and they'll reply "Gold, friends, repute, I left for him, I find In him, why should I leave him then, for gold, Repute or friends?"—and you have felt your heart Respond to such poor outcasts of the world As to so many friends; bad as you please, You've felt they were God's men and women still, So, not to be disowned by you. But she That stands there, calmly gives her lover up As means to wed the Earl that she may hide Their intercourse the surelier: and, for this, I curse her to her face before you all. Shame hunt her from the earth! Then Heaven do right To both! It hears me now—shall judge her then! [AS MILDRED faints and falls, TRESHAM rushes out.] AUSTIN. Stay, Tresham, we'll accompany you! GUENDOLEN. We? What, and leave Mildred? We? Why, where's my place But by her side, and where yours but by mine? Mildred—one word! Only look at me, then! AUSTIN. No, Guendolen! I echo Thorold's voice. She is unworthy to behold... GUENDOLEN. Us two? If you spoke on reflection, and if I Approved your speech—if you (to put the thing At lowest) you the soldier, bound to make The king's cause yours and fight for it, and throw Regard to others of its right or wrong, —If with a death-white woman you can help, Let alone sister, let alone a Mildred, You left her—or if I, her cousin, friend This morning, playfellow but yesterday, Who said, or thought at least a thousand times, "I'd serve you if I could," should now face round And say, "Ah, that's to only signify I'd serve you while you're fit to serve yourself: So long as fifty eyes await the turn Of yours to forestall its yet half-formed wish, I'll proffer my assistance you'll not need— When every tongue is praising you, I'll join The praisers' chorus—when you're hemmed about With lives between you and detraction—lives To be laid down if a rude voice, rash eye, Rough hand should violate the sacred ring Their worship throws about you,—then indeed, Who'll stand

up for you stout as I?" If so We said, and so we did,—not Mildred there Would be unworthy to behold us both, But we should be unworthy, both of us. To be beheld by—by—your meanest dog, Which, if that sword were broken in your face Before a crowd, that badge torn off your breast, And you cast out with hooting and contempt, —Would push his way thro' all the hooters, gain Your side, go off with you and all your shame To the next ditch you choose to die in! Austin, Do you love me? Here's Austin, Mildred,—here's Your brother says he does not believe half— No, nor half that—of all he heard! He says, Look up and take his hand! AUSTIN. Look up and take My hand, dear Mildred! MILDRED. I—I was so young! Beside, I loved him, Thorold—and I had No mother; God forgot me: so, I fell. GUENDOLEN. Mildred! MILDRED. Require no further! Did I dream That I could palliate what is done? All's true. Now, punish me! A woman takes my hand? Let go my hand! You do not know, I see. I thought that Thorold told you. GUENDOLEN. What is this? Where start you to? MILDRED. Oh, Austin, loosen me! You heard the whole of it—your eyes were worse, In their surprise, than Thorold's! Oh, unless You stay to execute his sentence, loose My hand! Has Thorold gone, and are you here? GUENDOLEN. Here, Mildred, we two friends of yours will wait Your bidding; be you silent, sleep or muse! Only, when you shall want your bidding done, How can we do it if we are not by? Here's Austin waiting patiently your will! One spirit to command, and one to love And to believe in it and do its best, Poor as that is, to help it—why, the world Has been won many a time, its length and breadth, By just such a beginning! MILDRED. I believe If once I threw my arms about your neck And sunk my head upon your breast, that I Should weep again. GUENDOLEN. Let go her hand now, Austin! Wait for me. Pace the gallery and think On the world's seemings and realities, Until I call you. [AUSTIN goes.] MILDRED. No—I cannot weep. No more tears from this brain—no sleep—no tears! O Guendolen, I love you! GUENDOLEN. Yes: and "love" Is a short word that says so very much! It says that you confide in me. MILDRED. Confide! GUENDOLEN. Your lover's name, then!

I've so much to learn, Ere I can work in your behalf! MILDRED. My friend, You know I cannot tell his name. GUENDOLEN. At least He is your lover? and you love him too? MILDRED. Ah, do you ask me that,—but I am fallen So low! GUENDOLEN. You love him still, then? MILDRED. My sole prop Against the guilt that crushes me! I say, Each night ere I lie down, "I was so young— I had no mother, and I loved him so!" And then God seems indulgent, and I dare Trust him my soul in sleep. GUENDOLEN. How could you let us E'en talk to you about Lord Mertoun then? MILDRED. There is a cloud around me. GUENDOLEN. But you said You would receive his suit in spite of this? MILDRED. I say there is a cloud... GUENDOLEN. No cloud to me! Lord Mertoun and your lover are the same! MILDRED. What maddest fancy... GUENDOLEN [calling aloud.] Austin! (spare your pains— When I have got a truth, that truth I keep)— MILDRED. By all you love, sweet Guendolen, forbear! Have I confided in you... GUENDOLEN. Just for this! Austin!—Oh, not to guess it at the first! But I did guess it—that is, I divined, Felt by an instinct how it was: why else Should I pronounce you free from all that heap Of sins which had been irredeemable? I felt they were not yours—what other way Than this, not yours? The secret's wholly mine! MILDRED. If you would see me die before his face... GUENDOLEN. I'd hold my peace! And if the Earl returns To-night? MILDRED. Ah Heaven, he's lost! GUENDOLEN. I thought so. Austin! Enter AUSTIN Oh, where have you been hiding? AUSTIN. Thorold's gone, I know not how, across the meadow-land. I watched him till I lost him in the skirts O' the beech-wood. GUENDOLEN. Gone? All thwarts us. MILDRED. Thorold too? GUENDOLEN. I have thought. First lead this Mildred to her room. Go on the other side; and then we'll seek Your brother: and I'll tell you, by the way, The greatest comfort in the world. You said There was a clue to all. Remember, Sweet, He said there was a clue! I hold it. Come!

ACT III

SCENE I.—The end of the Yew-tree Avenue under MILDRED'S Window. A light seen through a central red pane Enter TRESHAM through the trees Again here! But I cannot lose myself. The heath—the orchard—I have traversed glades And dells and bosky paths which used to lead Into green wild-wood depths, bewildering My boy's adventurous step. And now they tend Hither or soon or late; the blackest shade Breaks up, the thronged trunks of the trees ope wide, And the dim turret I have fled from, fronts Again my step; the very river put Its arm about me and conducted me To this detested spot. Why then, I'll shun Their will no longer: do your will with me! Oh, bitter! To have reared a towering scheme Of happiness, and to behold it razed, Were nothing: all men hope, and see their hopes Frustrate, and grieve awhile, and hope anew. But I... to hope that from a line like ours No horrid prodigy like this would spring, Were just as though I hoped that from these old Confederates against the sovereign day, Children of older and yet older sires, Whose living coral berries dropped, as now On me, on many a baron's surcoat once, On many a beauty's whimple—would proceed No poison-tree, to thrust, from hell its root, Hither and thither its strange snaky arms. Why came I here? What must I do? [A bell strikes.] A bell? Midnight! and 'tis at midnight... Ah, I catch —Woods, river, plains, I catch your meaning now, And I obey you! Hist! This tree will serve. [He retires behind one of the trees. After a pause, enter MERTOUN cloaked as before.] MERTOUN. Not time! Beat out thy last voluptuous beat Of hope and fear, my heart! I thought the clock I' the chapel struck as I was pushing through The ferns. And so I shall no more see rise My love-star! Oh, no matter for the past! So much the more delicious task to watch Mildred revive: to pluck out, thorn by thorn, All traces of the rough forbidden path My rash love lured her to! Each day must see Some fear of hers effaced, some hope renewed: Then there will be surprises, unforeseen Delights in store. I'll not regret the past. [The light is placed above in the purple pane.] And see, my signal rises, Mildred's star! I never saw it lovelier than now It rises for the last time. If it sets, 'Tis that the re-assuring sun may dawn. [As he prepares to ascend the last tree

of the avenue, TRESHAM arrests his arm.] Unhand me—peasant, by your grasp! Here's gold. 'Twas a mad freak of mine. I said I'd pluck A branch from the white-blossomed shrub beneath The casement there. Take this, and hold your peace. TRESHAM. Into the moonlight yonder, come with me! Out of the shadow! MERTOUN. I am armed, fool! TRESHAM. Yes, Or no? You'll come into the light, or no? My hand is on your throat—refuse!— MERTOUN. That voice! Where have I heard... no—that was mild and slow. I'll come with you. [They advance.] TRESHAM. You're armed: that's well. Declare Your name: who are you? MERTOUN. (Tresham!—she is lost!) TRESHAM. Oh, silent? Do you know, you bear yourself Exactly as, in curious dreams I've had How felons, this wild earth is full of, look When they're detected, still your kind has looked! The bravo holds an assured countenance, The thief is voluble and plausible, But silently the slave of lust has crouched When I have fancied it before a man. Your name! MERTOUN. I do conjure Lord Tresham—ay, Kissing his foot, if so I might prevail— That he for his own sake forbear to ask My name! As heaven's above, his future weal Or woe depends upon my silence! Vain! I read your white inexorable face. Know me, Lord Tresham! [He throws off his disguises.] TRESHAM. Mertoun! [After a pause.] Draw now! MERTOUN. Hear me But speak first! TRESHAM. Not one least word on your life! Be sure that I will strangle in your throat The least word that informs me how you live And yet seem what you seem! No doubt 'twas you Taught Mildred still to keep that face and sin. We should join hands in frantic sympathy If you once taught me the unteachable, Explained how you can live so and so lie. With God's help I retain, despite my sense, The old belief—a life like yours is still Impossible. Now draw! MERTOUN. Not for my sake, Do I entreat a hearing—for your sake, And most, for her sake! TRESHAM. Ha, ha, what should I Know of your ways? A miscreant like yourself, How must one rouse his ire? A blow?—that's pride No doubt, to him! One spurns him, does one not? Or sets the foot upon his mouth, or spits Into his face! Come! Which, or all of these? MERTOUN. 'Twixt him and me

and Mildred, Heaven be judge! Can I avoid this? Have your will, my lord! [He draws and, after a few passes, falls.] TRESHAM. You are not hurt? MERTOUN. You'll hear me now! TRESHAM. But rise! MERTOUN. Ah, Tresham, say I not "you'll hear me now!" And what procures a man the right to speak In his defence before his fellow man, But—I suppose—the thought that presently He may have leave to speak before his God His whole defence? TRESHAM. Not hurt? It cannot be! You made no effort to resist me. Where Did my sword reach you? Why not have returned My thrusts? Hurt where? MERTOUN. My lord— TRESHAM. How young he is! MERTOUN. Lord Tresham, I am very young, and yet I have entangled other lives with mine. Do let me speak, and do believe my speech! That when I die before you presently,— TRESHAM. Can you stay here till I return with help? MERTOUN. Oh, stay by me! When I was less than boy I did you grievous wrong and knew it not— Upon my honour, knew it not! Once known, I could not find what seemed a better way To right you than I took: my life—you feel How less than nothing were the giving you The life you've taken! But I thought my way The better—only for your sake and hers: And as you have decided otherwise, Would I had an infinity of lives To offer you! Now say—instruct me—think! Can you, from the brief minutes I have left, Eke out my reparation? Oh think—think! For I must wring a partial—dare I say, Forgiveness from you, ere I die? TRESHAM. I do Forgive you. MERTOUN. Wait and ponder that great word! Because, if you forgive me, I shall hope To speak to you of—Mildred! TRESHAM. Mertoun, haste And anger have undone us. 'Tis not you Should tell me for a novelty you're young, Thoughtless, unable to recall the past. Be but your pardon ample as my own! MERTOUN. Ah, Tresham, that a sword-stroke and a drop Of blood or two, should bring all this about Why, 'twas my very fear of you, my love Of you—(what passion like a boy's for one Like you?)—that ruined me! I dreamed of you— You, all accomplished, courted everywhere, The scholar and the gentleman. I burned To knit myself to you: but I was young, And your surpassing reputation kept me So far aloof! Oh, wherefore all

that love? With less of love, my glorious yesterday Of praise and gentlest words and kindest looks, Had taken place perchance six months ago. Even now, how happy we had been! And yet I know the thought of this escaped you, Tresham! Let me look up into your face; I feel 'Tis changed above me: yet my eyes are glazed. Where? where? [As he endeavours to raise himself, his eye catches the lamp.] Ah, Mildred! What will Mildred do? Tresham, her life is bound up in the life That's bleeding fast away! I'll live—must live, There, if you'll only turn me I shall live And save her! Tresham—oh, had you but heard! Had you but heard! What right was yours to set The thoughtless foot upon her life and mine, And then say, as we perish, "Had I thought, All had gone otherwise"? We've sinned and die: Never you sin, Lord Tresham! for you'll die, And God will judge you. TRESHAM. Yes, be satisfied! That process is begun. MERTOUN. And she sits there Waiting for me! Now, say you this to her— You, not another—say, I saw him die As he breathed this, "I love her"—you don't know What those three small words mean! Say, loving her Lowers me down the bloody slope to death With memories... I speak to her, not you, Who had no pity, will have no remorse, Perchance intend her... Die along with me, Dear Mildred! 'tis so easy, and you'll 'scape So much unkindness! Can I lie at rest, With rude speech spoken to you, ruder deeds Done to you?—heartless men shall have my heart, And I tied down with grave-clothes and the worm, Aware, perhaps, of every blow—oh God!— Upon those lips—yet of no power to tear The felon stripe by stripe! Die, Mildred! Leave Their honourable world to them! For God We're good enough, though the world casts us out. [A whistle is heard.] TRESHAM. Ho, Gerard! Enter GERARD, AUSTIN and GUENDOLEN, with lights No one speak! You see what's done. I cannot bear another voice. MERTOUN. There's light— Light all about me, and I move to it. Tresham, did I not tell you—did you not Just promise to deliver words of mine To Mildred? TRESHAM. I will bear those words to her. MERTOUN. Now? TRESHAM. Now. Lift you the body, and leave me The head. [As they have half raised MERTOUN, he turns suddenly.] MERTOUN. I knew they

turned me: turn me not from her! There! stay you! there! [Dies.] GUENDOLEN [after a pause]. Austin, remain you here With Thorold until Gerard comes with help: Then lead him to his chamber. I must go To Mildred. TRESHAM. Guendolen, I hear each word You utter. Did you hear him bid me give His message? Did you hear my promise? I, And only I, see Mildred. GUENDOLEN. She will die. TRESHAM. Oh no, she will not die! I dare not hope She'll die. What ground have you to think she'll die? Why, Austin's with you! AUSTIN. Had we but arrived Before you fought! TRESHAM. There was no fight at all. He let me slaughter him—the boy! I'll trust The body there to you and Gerard—thus! Now bear him on before me. AUSTIN. Whither bear him? TRESHAM. Oh, to my chamber! When we meet there next, We shall be friends. [They bear out the body of MERTOUN.] Will she die, Guendolen? GUENDOLEN. Where are you taking me? TRESHAM. He fell just here. Now answer me. Shall you in your whole life —You who have nought to do with Mertoun's fate, Now you have seen his breast upon the turf, Shall you e'er walk this way if you can help? When you and Austin wander arm-in-arm Through our ancestral grounds, will not a shade Be ever on the meadow and the waste— Another kind of shade than when the night Shuts the woodside with all its whispers up? But will you ever so forget his breast As carelessly to cross this bloody turf Under the black yew avenue? That's well! You turn your head: and I then?— GUENDOLEN. What is done Is done. My care is for the living. Thorold, Bear up against this burden: more remains To set the neck to! TRESHAM. Dear and ancient trees My fathers planted, and I loved so well! What have I done that, like some fabled crime Of yore, lets loose a Fury leading thus Her miserable dance amidst you all? Oh, never more for me shall winds intone With all your tops a vast antiphony, Demanding and responding in God's praise! Hers ye are now, not mine! Farewell—farewell!

SCENE II.—MILDRED'S Chamber MILDRED alone He comes not! I have heard of those who seemed Resourceless in prosperity,—you thought Sorrow might slay

them when she listed; yet Did they so gather up their diffused strength At her first menace, that they bade her strike, And stood and laughed her subtlest skill to scorn. Oh, 'tis not so with me! The first woe fell, And the rest fall upon it, not on me: Else should I bear that Henry comes not?—fails Just this first night out of so many nights? Loving is done with. Were he sitting now, As so few hours since, on that seat, we'd love No more—contrive no thousand happy ways To hide love from the loveless, any more. I think I might have urged some little point In my defence, to Thorold; he was breathless For the least hint of a defence: but no, The first shame over, all that would might fall. No Henry! Yet I merely sit and think The morn's deed o'er and o'er. I must have crept Out of myself. A Mildred that has lost Her lover—oh, I dare not look upon Such woe! I crouch away from it! 'Tis she, Mildred, will break her heart, not I! The world Forsakes me: only Henry's left me—left? When I have lost him, for he does not come, And I sit stupidly... Oh Heaven, break up This worse than anguish, this mad apathy, By any means or any messenger! TRESHAM [without]. Mildred! MILDRED. Come in! Heaven hears me! [Enter TRESHAM.] You? alone? Oh, no more cursing! TRESHAM. Mildred, I must sit. There—you sit! MILDRED. Say it, Thorold—do not look The curse! deliver all you come to say! What must become of me? Oh, speak that thought Which makes your brow and cheeks so pale! TRESHAM. My thought? MILDRED. All of it! TRESHAM. How we waded years—ago— After those water-lilies, till the plash, I know not how, surprised us; and you dared Neither advance nor turn back: so, we stood Laughing and crying until Gerard came— Once safe upon the turf, the loudest too, For once more reaching the relinquished prize! How idle thoughts are, some men's, dying men's! Mildred,— MILDRED. You call me kindlier by my name Than even yesterday: what is in that? TRESHAM. It weighs so much upon my mind that I This morning took an office not my own! I might... of course, I must be glad or grieved, Content or not, at every little thing That touches you. I may with a wrung heart Even reprove you, Mildred; I did more: Will you forgive me? MILDRED.

Thorold? do you mock? Oh no... and yet you bid me... say that word! TRESHAM. Forgive me, Mildred!—are you silent, Sweet? MILDRED [starting up]. Why does not Henry Mertoun come to-night? Are you, too, silent? [Dashing his mantle aside, and pointing to his scabbard, which is empty.] Ah, this speaks for you! You've murdered Henry Mertoun! Now proceed! What is it I must pardon? This and all? Well, I do pardon you—I think I do. Thorold, how very wretched you must be! TRESHAM. He bade me tell you... MILDRED. What I do forbid Your utterance of! So much that you may tell And will not—how you murdered him... but, no! You'll tell me that he loved me, never more Than bleeding out his life there: must I say "Indeed," to that? Enough! I pardon you. TRESHAM. You cannot, Mildred! for the harsh words, yes: Of this last deed Another's judge: whose doom I wait in doubt, despondency and fear. MILDRED. Oh, true! There's nought for me to pardon! True! You loose my soul of all its cares at once. Death makes me sure of him for ever! You Tell me his last words? He shall tell me them, And take my answer—not in words, but reading Himself the heart I had to read him late, Which death... TRESHAM. Death? You are dying too? Well said Of Guendolen! I dared not hope you'd die: But she was sure of it. MILDRED. Tell Guendolen I loved her, and tell Austin... TRESHAM. Him you loved: And me? MILDRED. Ah, Thorold! Was't not rashly done To quench that blood, on fire with youth and hope And love of me—whom you loved too, and yet Suffered to sit here waiting his approach While you were slaying him? Oh, doubtlessly You let him speak his poor confused boy's-speech —Do his poor utmost to disarm your wrath And respite me!—you let him try to give The story of our love and ignorance, And the brief madness and the long despair— You let him plead all this, because your code Of honour bids you hear before you strike: But at the end, as he looked up for life Into your eyes—you struck him down! TRESHAM. No! No! Had I but heard him—had I let him speak Half the truth—less—had I looked long on him I had desisted! Why, as he lay there, The moon on his flushed cheek, I gathered all The story ere he told it: I saw through

The troubled surface of his crime and yours A depth of purity immovable, Had I but glanced, where all seemed turbidest Had gleamed some inlet to the calm beneath; I would not glance: my punishment's at hand. There, Mildred, is the truth! and you—say on— You curse me? MILDRED. As I dare approach that Heaven Which has not bade a living thing despair, Which needs no code to keep its grace from stain, But bids the vilest worm that turns on it Desist and be forgiven,—I—forgive not, But bless you, Thorold, from my soul of souls! [Falls on his neck.] There! Do not think too much upon the past! The cloud that's broke was all the same a cloud While it stood up between my friend and you; You hurt him 'neath its shadow: but is that So past retrieve? I have his heart, you know; I may dispose of it: I give it you! It loves you as mine loves! Confirm me, Henry! [Dies.] TRESHAM. I wish thee joy, Beloved! I am glad In thy full gladness! GUENDOLEN [without]. Mildred! Tresham! [Entering with AUSTIN.] Thorold, I could desist no longer. Ah, she swoons! That's well. TRESHAM. Oh, better far than that! GUENDOLEN. She's dead! Let me unlock her arms! TRESHAM. She threw them thus About my neck, and blessed me, and then died: You'll let them stay now, Guendolen! AUSTIN. Leave her And look to him! What ails you, Thorold? GUENDOLEN. White As she, and whiter! Austin! quick—this side! AUSTIN. A froth is oozing through his clenched teeth; Both lips, where they're not bitten through, are black: Speak, dearest Thorold! TRESHAM. Something does weigh down My neck beside her weight: thanks: I should fall But for you, Austin, I believe!—there, there, 'Twill pass away soon!—ah,—I had forgotten: I am dying. GUENDOLEN. Thorold—Thorold—why was this? TRESHAM. I said, just as I drank the poison off, The earth would be no longer earth to me, The life out of all life was gone from me. There are blind ways provided, the fore-done Heart-weary player in this pageant-world Drops out by, letting the main masque defile By the conspicuous portal: I am through— Just through! GUENDOLEN. Don't leave him, Austin! Death is close. TRESHAM. Already Mildred's face is peacefuller, I see you, Austin—feel you; here's my hand,

Put yours in it—you, Guendolen, yours too! You're lord and lady now—you're Treshams; name And fame are yours: you hold our 'scutcheon up. Austin, no blot on it! You see how blood Must wash one blot away: the first blot came And the first blood came. To the vain world's eye All's gules again: no care to the vain world, From whence the red was drawn! AUSTIN. No blot shall come! TRESHAM. I said that: yet it did come. Should it come, Vengeance is God's, not man's. Remember me! [Dies.] GUENDOLEN [letting fall the pulseless arm]. Ah, Thorold, we can but—remember you!

The End

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A BLOT IN THE 'SCUTCHEON ***

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