

Not a word more was said, on either side, as we walked back to the house. Miss Halcombe hastened immediately to her sister's room, and I withdrew to my studio to set in order all of Mr. Fairlie's drawings that I had not yet mounted and restored before I resigned them to the care of other hands. Thoughts that I had hitherto restrained, thoughts that made my position harder than ever to endure, crowded on me now that I was alone.

She was engaged to be married, and her future husband was Sir Percival Glyde. A man of the rank of Baronet, and the owner of property in Hampshire.

There were hundreds of baronets in England, and dozens of landowners in Hampshire. Judging by the ordinary rules of evidence, I had not the shadow of a reason, thus far, for connecting Sir Percival Glyde with the suspicious words of inquiry that had been spoken to me by the woman in white. And yet, I did connect him with them. Was it because he had now become associated in my mind with Miss Fairlie, Miss Fairlie being, in her turn, associated with Anne Catherick, since the night when I had discovered the ominous likeness between them? Had the events of the morning so unnerved me already that I was at the mercy of any delusion which common chances and common coincidences might suggest to my imagination? Impossible to say. I could only feel that what had passed between Miss Halcombe and myself, on our way from the summer-house, had affected me very strangely. The foreboding of some undiscoverable danger lying hid from us all in the darkness of the future was strong on me. The doubt whether I was not linked already to a chain of events which even my approaching departure from Cumberland would be powerless to snap asunder—the doubt whether we any of us saw the end as the end would really be—gathered more and more darkly over my mind. Poignant as it was, the sense of suffering caused by the miserable end of my brief, presumptuous love seemed to be blunted and deadened by the still stronger sense of something obscurely impending, something invisibly threatening, that Time was holding over our heads.

I had been engaged with the drawings little more than half an hour, when there was a knock at the door. It opened, on my answering; and, to my surprise, Miss Halcombe entered the room.

Her manner was angry and agitated. She caught up a chair for herself before I could give her one, and sat down in it, close at my side.

"Mr. Hartright," she said, "I had hoped that all painful subjects of conversation were exhausted between us, for to-day at least. But it is not to be so. There is some underhand villainy at work to frighten my sister about her approaching marriage. You saw me send the gardener on to the house, with a letter addressed, in a strange handwriting, to Miss Fairlie?"

"Certainly."

"The letter is an anonymous letter—a vile attempt to injure Sir Percival Glyde in my sister's estimation. It has so agitated and alarmed her that I have had the greatest possible difficulty in composing her spirits sufficiently to allow me to leave her room and come here. I know this is a family matter on which I ought not to consult you, and in which you can feel no concern or interest——"

"I beg your pardon, Miss Halcombe. I feel the strongest possible concern and interest in anything that affects Miss Fairlie's happiness or yours."

"I am glad to hear you say so. You are the only person in the house, or out of it, who can advise me. Mr. Fairlie, in his state of health and with his horror of difficulties and mysteries of all kinds, is not to be thought of. The clergyman is a good, weak man, who knows nothing out of the routine of his duties; and our neighbours are just the sort of comfortable, jog-trot

acquaintances whom one cannot disturb in times of trouble and danger. What I want to know is this: ought I at once to take such steps as I can to discover the writer of the letter? or ought I to wait, and apply to Mr. Fairlie's legal adviser to-morrow? It is a question—perhaps a very important one—of gaining or losing a day. Tell me what you think, Mr. Hartright. If necessity had not already obliged me to take you into my confidence under very delicate circumstances, even my helpless situation would, perhaps, be no excuse for me. But as things are I cannot surely be wrong, after all that has passed between us, in forgetting that you are a friend of only three months' standing."

She gave me the letter. It began abruptly, without any preliminary form of address, as follows—

"Do you believe in dreams? I hope, for your own sake, that you do. See what Scripture says about dreams and their fulfilment (Genesis xl. 8, xli. 25; Daniel iv. 18-25), and take the warning I send you before it is too late.

"Last night I dreamed about you, Miss Fairlie. I dreamed that I was standing inside the communion rails of a church—I on one side of the altar-table, and the clergyman, with his surplice and his prayer-book, on the other.

"After a time there walked towards us, down the aisle of the church, a man and a woman, coming to be married. You were the woman. You looked so pretty and innocent in your beautiful white silk dress, and your long white lace veil, that my heart felt for you, and the tears came into my eyes.

"They were tears of pity, young lady, that heaven blesses and instead of falling from my eyes like the everyday tears that we all of us shed, they turned into two rays of light which slanted nearer and nearer to the man standing at the altar with you, till they touched his breast. The two rays sprang ill arches like two rainbows between me and him. I looked along them, and I saw down into his inmost heart.

"The outside of the man you were marrying was fair enough to see. He was neither tall nor short—he was a little below the middle size. A light, active, high-spirited man—about five-and-forty years old, to look at. He had a pale face, and was bald over the forehead, but had dark hair on the rest of his head. His beard was shaven on his chin, but was let to grow, of a fine rich brown, on his cheeks and his upper lip. His eyes were brown too, and very bright; his nose straight and handsome and delicate enough to have done for a woman's. His hands the same. He was troubled from time to time with a dry hacking cough, and when he put up his white right hand to his mouth, he showed the red scar of an old wound across the back of it. Have I dreamt of the right man? You know best, Miss Fairlie and you can say if I was deceived or not. Read next, what I saw beneath the outside—I entreat you, read, and profit.

"I looked along the two rays of light, and I saw down into his inmost heart. It was black as night, and on it were written, in the red flaming letters which are the handwriting of the fallen angel, 'Without pity and without remorse. He has strewn with misery the paths of others, and he will live to strew with misery the path of this woman by his side.' I read that, and then the rays of light shifted and pointed over his shoulder; and there, behind him, stood a fiend laughing. And the rays of light shifted once more, and pointed over your shoulder; and there behind you, stood an angel weeping. And the rays of light shifted for the third time, and pointed straight between you and that man. They widened and widened, thrusting you both asunder, one from the other. And the clergyman looked for the marriage-service in vain: it was gone out of the book, and he shut up the leaves, and put it from him in despair. And I woke with my eyes full of tears and my heart beating—for I believe in dreams.

“Believe too, Miss Fairlie—I beg of you, for your own sake, believe as I do. Joseph and Daniel, and others in Scripture, believed in dreams. Inquire into the past life of that man with the scar on his hand, before you say the words that make you his miserable wife. I don’t give you this warning on my account, but on yours. I have an interest in your well-being that will live as long as I draw breath. Your mother’s daughter has a tender place in my heart—for your mother was my first, my best, my only friend.”

There the extraordinary letter ended, without signature of any sort.

The handwriting afforded no prospect of a clue. It was traced on ruled lines, in the cramped, conventional, copy-book character technically termed “small hand.” It was feeble and faint, and defaced by blots, but had otherwise nothing to distinguish it.

“That is not an illiterate letter,” said Miss Halcombe, “and at the same time, it is surely too incoherent to be the letter of an educated person in the higher ranks of life. The reference to the bridal dress and veil, and other little expressions, seem to point to it as the production of some woman. What do you think, Mr. Hartright?”

“I think so too. It seems to me to be not only the letter of a woman, but of a woman whose mind must be——”

“Deranged?” suggested Miss Halcombe. “It struck me in that light too.”

I did not answer. While I was speaking, my eyes rested on the last sentence of the letter: “Your mother’s daughter has a tender place in my heart—for your mother was my first, my best, my only friend.” Those words and the doubt which had just escaped me as to the sanity of the writer of the letter, acting together on my mind, suggested an idea, which I was literally afraid to express openly, or even to encourage secretly. I began to doubt whether my own faculties were not in danger of losing their balance. It seemed almost like a monomania to be tracing back everything strange that happened, everything unexpected that was said, always to the same hidden source and the same sinister influence. I resolved, this time, in defence of my own courage and my own sense, to come to no decision that plain fact did not warrant, and to turn my back resolutely on everything that tempted me in the shape of surmise.

“If we have any chance of tracing the person who has written this,” I said, returning the letter to Miss Halcombe, “there can be no harm in seizing our opportunity the moment it offers. I think we ought to speak to the gardener again about the elderly woman who gave him the letter, and then to continue our inquiries in the village. But first let me ask a question. You mentioned just now the alternative of consulting Mr. Fairlie’s legal adviser to-morrow. Is there no possibility of communicating with him earlier? Why not to-day?”

“I can only explain,” replied Miss Halcombe, “by entering into certain particulars, connected with my sister’s marriage- engagement, which I did not think it necessary or desirable to mention to you this morning. One of Sir Percival Glyde’s objects in coming here on Monday, is to fix the period of his marriage, which has hitherto been left quite unsettled. He is anxious that the event should take place before the end of the year.”

“Does Miss Fairlie know of that wish?” I asked eagerly.

“She has no suspicion of it, and after what has happened, I shall not take the responsibility upon myself of enlightening her. Sir Percival has only mentioned his views to Mr. Fairlie, who has told me himself that he is ready and anxious, as Laura’s guardian, to forward them. He has written to London, to the family solicitor, Mr. Gilmore. Mr. Gilmore happens to be away in Glasgow on business, and he has replied by proposing to stop at Limmeridge House on his way back to town. He will arrive to-morrow, and will stay with us a few days, so as to allow Sir

Percival time to plead his own cause. If he succeeds, Mr. Gilmore will then return to London, taking with him his instructions for my sister's marriage- settlement. You understand now, Mr. Hartright, why I speak of waiting to take legal advice until to-morrow? Mr. Gilmore is the old and tried friend of two generations of Fairlies, and we can trust him, as we could trust no one else."

The marriage-settlement! The mere hearing of those two words stung me with a jealous despair that was poison to my higher and better instincts. I began to think—it is hard to confess this, but I must suppress nothing from beginning to end of the terrible story that I now stand committed to reveal—I began to think, with a hateful eagerness of hope, of the vague charges against Sir Percival Glyde which the anonymous letter contained. What if those wild accusations rested on a foundation of truth? What if their truth could be proved before the fatal words of consent were spoken, and the marriage-settlement was drawn? I have tried to think since, that the feeling which then animated me began and ended in pure devotion to Miss Fairlie's interests, but I have never succeeded in deceiving myself into believing it, and I must not now attempt to deceive others. The feeling began and ended in reckless, vindictive, hopeless hatred of the man who was to marry her.

"If we are to find out anything," I said, speaking under the new influence which was now directing me, "we had better not let another minute slip by us unemployed. I can only suggest, once more, the propriety of questioning the gardener a second time, and of inquiring in the village immediately afterwards."

"I think I may be of help to you in both cases," said Miss Halcombe, rising. "Let us go, Mr. Hartright, at once, and do the best we can together."

I had the door in my hand to open it for her—but I stopped, on a sudden, to ask an important question before we set forth.

"One of the paragraphs of the anonymous letter," I said, "contains some sentences of minute personal description. Sir Percival Glyde's name is not mentioned, I know—but does that description at all resemble him?"

"Accurately—even in stating his age to be forty-five——"

Forty-five; and she was not yet twenty-one! Men of his age married wives of her age every day—and experience had shown those marriages to be often the happiest ones. I knew that—and yet even the mention of his age, when I contrasted it with hers, added to my blind hatred and distrust of him.

"Accurately," Miss Halcombe continued, "even to the scar on his right hand, which is the scar of a wound that he received years since when he was travelling in Italy. There can be no doubt that every peculiarity of his personal appearance is thoroughly well known to the writer of the letter."

"Even a cough that he is troubled with is mentioned, if I remember right?"

"Yes, and mentioned correctly. He treats it lightly himself, though it sometimes makes his friends anxious about him."

"I suppose no whispers have ever been heard against his character?"

"Mr. Hartright! I hope you are not unjust enough to let that infamous letter influence you?"

I felt the blood rush into my cheeks, for I knew that it HAD influenced me.

"I hope not," I answered confusedly. "Perhaps I had no right to ask the question."

"I am not sorry you asked it," she said, "for it enables me to do justice to Sir Percival's reputation. Not a whisper, Mr. Hartright, has ever reached me, or my family, against him. He has

fought successfully two contested elections, and has come out of the ordeal unscathed. A man who can do that, in England, is a man whose character is established.”

I opened the door for her in silence, and followed her out. She had not convinced me. If the recording angel had come down from heaven to confirm her, and had opened his book to my mortal eyes, the recording angel would not have convinced me.

We found the gardener at work as usual. No amount of questioning could extract a single answer of any importance from the lad’s impenetrable stupidity. The woman who had given him the letter was an elderly woman; she had not spoken a word to him, and she had gone away towards the south in a great hurry. That was all the gardener could tell us.

The village lay southward of the house. So to the village we went next.

XII

Our inquiries at Limmeridge were patiently pursued in all directions, and among all sorts and conditions of people. But nothing came of them. Three of the villagers did certainly assure us that they had seen the woman, but as they were quite unable to describe her, and quite incapable of agreeing about the exact direction in which she was proceeding when they last saw her, these three bright exceptions to the general rule of total ignorance afforded no more real assistance to us than the mass of their unhelpful and unobservant neighbours.

The course of our useless investigations brought us, in time, to the end of the village at which the schools established by Mrs. Fairlie were situated. As we passed the side of the building appropriated to the use of the boys, I suggested the propriety of making a last inquiry of the schoolmaster, whom we might presume to be, in virtue of his office, the most intelligent man in the place.

“I am afraid the schoolmaster must have been occupied with his scholars,” said Miss Halcombe, “just at the time when the woman passed through the village and returned again. However, we can but try.”

We entered the playground enclosure, and walked by the schoolroom window to get round to the door, which was situated at the back of the building. I stopped for a moment at the window and looked in.

The schoolmaster was sitting at his high desk, with his back to me, apparently haranguing the pupils, who were all gathered together in front of him, with one exception. The one exception was a sturdy white-headed boy, standing apart from all the rest on a stool in a corner—a forlorn little Crusoe, isolated in his own desert island of solitary penal disgrace.

The door, when we got round to it, was ajar, and the school-master’s voice reached us plainly, as we both stopped for a minute under the porch.

“Now, boys,” said the voice, “mind what I tell you. If I hear another word spoken about ghosts in this school, it will be the worse for all of you. There are no such things as ghosts, and therefore any boy who believes in ghosts believes in what can’t possibly be; and a boy who belongs to Limmeridge School, and believes in what can’t possibly be, sets up his back against reason and discipline, and must be punished accordingly. You all see Jacob Postlethwaite standing up on the stool there in disgrace. He has been punished, not because he said he saw a ghost last night, but because he is too impudent and too obstinate to listen to reason, and because he persists in saying he saw the ghost after I have told him that no such thing can possibly be. If

nothing else will do, I mean to cane the ghost out of Jacob Postlethwaite, and if the thing spreads among any of the rest of you, I mean to go a step farther, and cane the ghost out of the whole school."

"We seem to have chosen an awkward moment for our visit," said Miss Halcombe, pushing open the door at the end of the schoolmaster's address, and leading the way in.

Our appearance produced a strong sensation among the boys. They appeared to think that we had arrived for the express purpose of seeing Jacob Postlethwaite caned.

"Go home all of you to dinner," said the schoolmaster, "except Jacob. Jacob must stop where he is; and the ghost may bring him his dinner, if the ghost pleases."

Jacob's fortitude deserted him at the double disappearance of his schoolfellows and his prospect of dinner. He took his hands out of his pockets, looked hard at his knuckles, raised them with great deliberation to his eyes, and when they got there, ground them round and round slowly, accompanying the action by short spasms of sniffing, which followed each other at regular intervals—the nasal minute guns of juvenile distress.

"We came here to ask you a question, Mr. Dempster," said Miss Halcombe, addressing the schoolmaster; "and we little expected to find you occupied in exorcising a ghost. What does it all mean? What has really happened?"

"That wicked boy has been frightening the whole school, Miss Halcombe, by declaring that he saw a ghost yesterday evening," answered the master; "and he still persists in his absurd story, in spite of all that I can say to him."

"Most extraordinary," said Miss Halcombe "I should not have thought it possible that any of the boys had imagination enough to see a ghost. This is a new accession indeed to the hard labour of forming the youthful mind at Limmeridge, and I heartily wish you well through it, Mr. Dempster. In the meantime, let me explain why you see me here, and what it is I want."

She then put the same question to the schoolmaster which we had asked already of almost every one else in the village. It was met by the same discouraging answer Mr. Dempster had not set eyes on the stranger of whom we were in search.

"We may as well return to the house, Mr. Hartright," said Miss Halcombe; "the information we want is evidently not to be found."

She had bowed to Mr. Dempster, and was about to leave the schoolroom, when the forlorn position of Jacob Postlethwaite, piteously sniffing on the stool of penitence, attracted her attention as she passed him, and made her stop good-humouredly to speak a word to the little prisoner before she opened the door.

"You foolish boy," she said, "why don't you beg Mr. Dempster's pardon, and hold your tongue about the ghost?"

"Eh!—but I saw t' ghaist," persisted Jacob Postlethwaite, with a stare of terror and a burst of tears.

"Stuff and nonsense! You saw nothing of the kind. Ghost indeed! What ghost——"

"I beg your pardon, Miss Halcombe," interposed the school-master a little uneasily—"but I think you had better not question the boy. The obstinate folly of his story is beyond all belief; and you might lead him into ignorantly——"

"Ignorantly what?" inquired Miss Halcombe sharply.

"Ignorantly shocking your feelings," said Mr. Dempster, looking very much discomposed.

"Upon my word, Mr. Dempster, you pay my feelings a great compliment in thinking them weak enough to be shocked by such an urchin as that!" She turned with an air of satirical

defiance to little Jacob, and began to question him directly. "Come!" she said, "I mean to know all about this. You naughty boy, when did you see the ghost?"

"Yestere'en, at the gloaming," replied Jacob.

"Oh! you saw it yesterday evening, in the twilight? And what was it like?"

"Arl in white—as a ghaist should be," answered the ghost-seer, with a confidence beyond his years.

"And where was it?"

"Away yander, in t' kirkyard—where a ghaist ought to be."

"As a 'ghaist' should be—where a 'ghaist' ought to be—why, you little fool, you talk as if the manners and customs of ghosts had been familiar to you from your infancy! You have got your story at your fingers' ends, at any rate. I suppose I shall hear next that you can actually tell me whose ghost it was?"

"Eh! but I just can," replied Jacob, nodding his head with an air of gloomy triumph.

Mr. Dempster had already tried several times to speak while Miss Halcombe was examining his pupil, and he now interposed resolutely enough to make himself heard.

"Excuse me, Miss Halcombe," he said, "if I venture to say that you are only encouraging the boy by asking him these questions."

"I will merely ask one more, Mr. Dempster, and then I shall be quite satisfied. Well," she continued, turning to the boy, "and whose ghost was it?"

"T' ghaist of Mistress Fairlie," answered Jacob in a whisper.

The effect which this extraordinary reply produced on Miss Halcombe fully justified the anxiety which the schoolmaster had shown to prevent her from hearing it. Her face crimsoned with indignation—she turned upon little Jacob with an angry suddenness which terrified him into a fresh burst of tears—opened her lips to speak to him—then controlled herself, and addressed the master instead of the boy.

"It is useless," she said, "to hold such a child as that responsible for what he says. I have little doubt that the idea has been put into his head by others. If there are people in this village, Mr. Dempster, who have forgotten the respect and gratitude due from every soul in it to my mother's memory, I will find them out, and if I have any influence with Mr. Fairlie, they shall suffer for it."

"I hope—indeed, I am sure, Miss Halcombe—that you are mistaken," said the schoolmaster. "The matter begins and ends with the boy's own perversity and folly. He saw, or thought he saw, a woman in white, yesterday evening, as he was passing the churchyard; and the figure, real or fancied, was standing by the marble cross, which he and every one else in Limmeridge knows to be the monument over Mrs. Fairlie's grave. These two circumstances are surely sufficient to have suggested to the boy himself the answer which has so naturally shocked you?"

Although Miss Halcombe did not seem to be convinced, she evidently felt that the schoolmaster's statement of the case was too sensible to be openly combated. She merely replied by thanking him for his attention, and by promising to see him again when her doubts were satisfied. This said, she bowed, and led the way out of the schoolroom.

Throughout the whole of this strange scene I had stood apart, listening attentively, and drawing my own conclusions. As soon as we were alone again, Miss Halcombe asked me if I had formed any opinion on what I had heard.

"A very strong opinion," I answered; "the boy's story, as I believe, has a foundation in fact. I confess I am anxious to see the monument over Mrs. Fairlie's grave, and to examine the ground about it."

“You shall see the grave.”

She paused after making that reply, and reflected a little as we walked on. “What has happened in the schoolroom,” she resumed, “has so completely distracted my attention from the subject of the letter, that I feel a little bewildered when I try to return to it. Must we give up all idea of making any further inquiries, and wait to place the thing in Mr. Gilmore’s hands to-morrow?”

“By no means, Miss Halcombe. What has happened in the schoolroom encourages me to persevere in the investigation.”

“Why does it encourage you?”

“Because it strengthens a suspicion I felt when you gave me the letter to read.”

“I suppose you had your reasons, Mr. Hartright, for concealing that suspicion from me till this moment?”

“I was afraid to encourage it in myself. I thought it was utterly preposterous—I distrusted it as the result of some perversity in my own imagination. But I can do so no longer. Not only the boy’s own answers to your questions, but even a chance expression that dropped from the schoolmaster’s lips in explaining his story, have forced the idea back into my mind. Events may yet prove that idea to be a delusion, Miss Halcombe; but the belief is strong in me, at this moment, that the fancied ghost in the churchyard, and the writer of the anonymous letter, are one and the same person.”

She stopped, turned pale, and looked me eagerly in the face.

“What person?”

“The schoolmaster unconsciously told you. When he spoke of the figure that the boy saw in the churchyard he called it ‘a woman in white.’ ”

“Not Anne Catherick?”

“Yes, Anne Catherick.”

She put her hand through my arm and leaned on it heavily.

“I don’t know why,” she said in low tones, “but there is something in this suspicion of yours that seems to startle and unnerve me. I feel——” She stopped, and tried to laugh it off. “Mr. Hartright,” she went on, “I will show you the grave, and then go back at once to the house. I had better not leave Laura too long alone. I had better go back and sit with her.”

We were close to the churchyard when she spoke. The church, a dreary building of grey stone, was situated in a little valley, so as to be sheltered from the bleak winds blowing over the moorland all round it. The burial-ground advanced, from the side of the church, a little way up the slope of the hill. It was surrounded by a rough, low stone wall, and was bare and open to the sky, except at one extremity, where a brook trickled down the stony hill-side, and a clump of dwarf trees threw their narrow shadows over the short, meagre grass. Just beyond the brook and the trees, and not far from one of the three stone stiles which afforded entrance, at various points, to the church-yard, rose the white marble cross that distinguished Mrs. Fairlie’s grave from the humbler monuments scattered about it.

“I need go no farther with you,” said Miss Halcombe, pointing to the grave. “You will let me know if you find anything to confirm the idea you have just mentioned to me. Let us meet again at the house.”

She left me. I descended at once to the churchyard, and crossed the stile which led directly to Mrs. Fairlie’s grave.

The grass about it was too short, and the ground too hard, to show any marks of footsteps. Disappointed thus far, I next looked attentively at the cross, and at the square block of marble below it, on which the inscription was cut.

The natural whiteness of the cross was a little clouded, here and there, by weather stains, and rather more than one half of the square block beneath it, on the side which bore the inscription, was in the same condition. The other half, however, attracted my attention at once by its singular freedom from stain or impurity of any kind. I looked closer, and saw that it had been cleaned—recently cleaned, in a downward direction from top to bottom. The boundary line between the part that had been cleaned and the part that had not was traceable wherever the inscription left a blank space of marble—sharply traceable as a line that had been produced by artificial means. Who had begun the cleansing of the marble, and who had left it unfinished?

I looked about me, wondering how the question was to be solved. No sign of a habitation could be discerned from the point at which I was standing—the burial-ground was left in the lonely possession of the dead. I returned to the church, and walked round it till I came to the back of the building; then crossed the boundary wall beyond, by another of the stone stiles, and found myself at the head of a path leading down into a deserted stone quarry. Against one side of the quarry a little two-room cottage was built, and just outside the door an old woman was engaged in washing.

I walked up to her, and entered into conversation about the church and burial-ground. She was ready enough to talk, and almost the first words she said informed me that her husband filled the two offices of clerk and sexton. I said a few words next in praise of Mrs. Fairlie's monument. The old woman shook her head, and told me I had not seen it at its best. It was her husband's business to look after it, but he had been so ailing and weak for months and months past, that he had hardly been able to crawl into church on Sundays to do his duty, and the monument had been neglected in consequence. He was getting a little better now, and in a week or ten days' time he hoped to be strong enough to set to work and clean it.

This information—extracted from a long rambling answer in the broadest Cumberland dialect—told me all that I most wanted to know. I gave the poor woman a trifle, and returned at once to Limmeridge House.

The partial cleansing of the monument had evidently been accomplished by a strange hand. Connecting what I had discovered, thus far, with what I had suspected after hearing the story of the ghost seen at twilight, I wanted nothing more to confirm my resolution to watch Mrs. Fairlie's grave, in secret, that evening, returning to it at sunset, and waiting within sight of it till the night fell. The work of cleansing the monument had been left unfinished, and the person by whom it had been begun might return to complete it.

On getting back to the house I informed Miss Halcombe of what I intended to do. She looked surprised and uneasy while I was explaining my purpose, but she made no positive objection to the execution of it. She only said, "I hope it may end well."

Just as she was leaving me again, I stopped her to inquire, as calmly as I could, after Miss Fairlie's health. She was in better spirits, and Miss Halcombe hoped she might be induced to take a little walking exercise while the afternoon sun lasted.

I returned to my own room to resume setting the drawings in order. It was necessary to do this, and doubly necessary to keep my mind employed on anything that would help to distract my attention from myself, and from the hopeless future that lay before me. From time to time I paused in my work to look out of window and watch the sky as the sun sank nearer and nearer to the horizon. On one of those occasions I saw a figure on the broad gravel walk under my window. It was Miss Fairlie.

I had not seen her since the morning, and I had hardly spoken to her then. Another day at Limmeridge was all that remained to me, and after that day my eyes might never look on her

again. This thought was enough to hold me at the window. I had sufficient consideration for her to arrange the blind so that she might not see me if she looked up, but I had no strength to resist the temptation of letting my eyes, at least, follow her as far as they could on her walk.

She was dressed in a brown cloak, with a plain black silk gown under it. On her head was the same simple straw hat which she had worn on the morning when we first met. A veil was attached to it now which hid her face from me. By her side trotted a little Italian greyhound, the pet companion of all her walks, smartly dressed in a scarlet cloth wrapper, to keep the sharp air from his delicate skin. She did not seem to notice the dog. She walked straight forward, with her head drooping a little, and her arms folded in her cloak. The dead leaves, which had whirled in the wind before me when I had heard of her marriage engagement in the morning, whirled in the wind before her, and rose and fell and scattered themselves at her feet as she walked on in the pale waning sunlight. The dog shivered and trembled, and pressed against her dress impatiently for notice and encouragement. But she never heeded him. She walked on, farther and farther away from me, with the dead leaves whirling about her on the path—walked on, till my aching eyes could see her no more, and I was left alone again with my own heavy heart.

In another hour's time I had done my work, and the sunset was at hand. I got my hat and coat in the hall, and slipped out of the house without meeting any one.

The clouds were wild in the western heaven, and the wind blew chill from the sea. Far as the shore was, the sound of the surf swept over the intervening moorland, and beat drearily in my ears when I entered the churchyard. Not a living creature was in sight. The place looked lonelier than ever as I chose my position, and waited and watched, with my eyes on the white cross that rose over Mrs. Fairlie's grave.

XIII

The exposed situation of the churchyard had obliged me to be cautious in choosing the position that I was to occupy.

The main entrance to the church was on the side next to the burial-ground, and the door was screened by a porch walled in on either side. After some little hesitation, caused by natural reluctance to conceal myself, indispensable as that concealment was to the object in view, I had resolved on entering the porch. A loophole window was pierced in each of its side walls. Through one of these windows I could see Mrs. Fairlie's grave. The other looked towards the stone quarry in which the sexton's cottage was built. Before me, fronting the porch entrance, was a patch of bare burial-ground, a line of low stone wall, and a strip of lonely brown hill, with the sunset clouds sailing heavily over it before the strong, steady wind. No living creature was visible or audible—no bird flew by me, no dog barked from the sexton's cottage. The pauses in the dull beating of the surf were filled up by the dreary rustling of the dwarf trees near the grave, and the cold faint bubble of the brook over its stony bed. A dreary scene and a dreary hour. My spirits sank fast as I counted out the minutes of the evening in my hiding-place under the church porch.

It was not twilight yet—the light of the setting sun still lingered in the heavens, and little more than the first half-hour of my solitary watch had elapsed—when I heard footsteps and a voice. The footsteps were approaching from the other side of the church, and the voice was a woman's.

“Don’t you fret, my dear, about the letter,” said the voice. “I gave it to the lad quite safe, and the lad he took it from me without a word. He went his way and I went mine, and not a living soul followed me afterwards—that I’ll warrant.”

These words strung up my attention to a pitch of expectation that was almost painful. There was a pause of silence, but the footsteps still advanced. In another moment two persons, both women, passed within my range of view from the porch window. They were walking straight towards the grave; and therefore they had their backs turned towards me.

One of the women was dressed in a bonnet and shawl. The other wore a long travelling-cloak of a dark-blue colour, with the hood drawn over her head. A few inches of her gown were visible below the cloak. My heart beat fast as I noted the colour—it was white.

After advancing about half-way between the church and the grave they stopped, and the woman in the cloak turned her head towards her companion. But her side face, which a bonnet might now have allowed me to see, was hidden by the heavy, projecting edge of the hood.

“Mind you keep that comfortable warm cloak on,” said the same voice which I had already heard—the voice of the woman in the shawl. “Mrs. Todd is right about your looking too particular, yesterday, all in white. I’ll walk about a little while you’re here, churchyards being not at all in my way, whatever they may be in yours. Finish what you want to do before I come back, and let us be sure and get home again before night.”

With those words she turned about, and retracing her steps, advanced with her face towards me. It was the face of an elderly woman, brown, rugged, and healthy, with nothing dishonest or suspicious in the look of it. Close to the church she stopped to pull her shawl closer round her.

“Queer,” she said to herself, “always queer, with her whims and her ways, ever since I can remember her. Harmless, though—as harmless, poor soul, as a little child.”

She sighed—looked about the burial-ground nervously—shook her head, as if the dreary prospect by no means pleased her, and disappeared round the corner of the church.

I doubted for a moment whether I ought to follow and speak to her or not. My intense anxiety to find myself face to face with her companion helped me to decide in the negative. I could ensure seeing the woman in the shawl by waiting near the churchyard until she came back—although it seemed more than doubtful whether she could give me the information of which I was in search. The person who had delivered the letter was of little consequence. The person who had written it was the one centre of interest, and the one source of information, and that person I now felt convinced was before me in the churchyard.

While these ideas were passing through my mind I saw the woman in the cloak approach close to the grave, and stand looking at it for a little while. She then glanced all round her, and taking a white linen cloth or handkerchief from under her cloak, turned aside towards the brook. The little stream ran into the churchyard under a tiny archway in the bottom of the wall, and ran out again, after a winding course of a few dozen yards, under a similar opening. She dipped the cloth in the water, and returned to the grave. I saw her kiss the white cross, then kneel down before the inscription, and apply her wet cloth to the cleansing of it.

After considering how I could show myself with the least possible chance of frightening her, I resolved to cross the wall before me, to skirt round it outside, and to enter the churchyard again by the stile near the grave, in order that she might see me as I approached. She was so absorbed over her employment that she did not hear me coming until I had stepped over the stile. Then she looked up, started to her feet with a faint cry, and stood facing me in speechless and motionless terror.

“Don’t be frightened,” I said. “Surely you remember me?”

I stopped while I spoke—then advanced a few steps gently—then stopped again—and so approached by little and little till I was close to her. If there had been any doubt still left in my mind, it must have been now set at rest. There, speaking affrightedly for itself—there was the same face confronting me over Mrs. Fairlie's grave which had first looked into mine on the high-road by night.

"You remember me?" I said. "We met very late, and I helped you to find the way to London. Surely you have not forgotten that?"

Her features relaxed, and she drew a heavy breath of relief. I saw the new life of recognition stirring slowly under the death-like stillness which fear had set on her face.

"Don't attempt to speak to me just yet," I went on. "Take time to recover yourself—take time to feel quite certain that I am a friend."

"You are very kind to me," she murmured. "As kind now as you were then."

She stopped, and I kept silence on my side. I was not granting time for composure to her only, I was gaining time also for myself. Under the wan wild evening light, that woman and I were met together again, a grave between us, the dead about us, the lonesome hills closing us round on every side. The time, the place, the circumstances under which we now stood face to face in the evening stillness of that dreary valley—the lifelong interests which might hang suspended on the next chance words that passed between us—the sense that, for aught I knew to the contrary, the whole future of Laura Fairlie's life might be determined, for good or for evil, by my winning or losing the confidence of the forlorn creature who stood trembling by her mother's grave—all threatened to shake the steadiness and the self-control on which every inch of the progress I might yet make now depended. I tried hard, as I felt this, to possess myself of all my resources; I did my utmost to turn the few moments for reflection to the best account.

"Are you calmer now?" I said, as soon as I thought it time to speak again. "Can you talk to me without feeling frightened, and without forgetting that I am a friend?"

"How did you come here?" she asked, without noticing what I had just said to her.

"Don't you remember my telling you, when we last met, that I was going to Cumberland? I have been in Cumberland ever since—I have been staying all the time at Limmeridge House."

"At Limmeridge House!" Her pale face brightened as she repeated the words, her wandering eyes fixed on me with a sudden interest. "Ah, how happy you must have been!" she said, looking at me eagerly, without a shadow of its former distrust left in her expression.

I took advantage of her newly-aroused confidence in me to observe her face, with an attention and a curiosity which I had hitherto restrained myself from showing, for caution's sake. I looked at her, with my mind full of that other lovely face which had so ominously recalled her to my memory on the terrace by moonlight. I had seen Anne Catherick's likeness in Miss Fairlie. I now saw Miss Fairlie's likeness in Anne Catherick—saw it all the more clearly because the points of dissimilarity between the two were presented to me as well as the points of resemblance. In the general outline of the countenance and general proportion of the features—in the colour of the hair and in the little nervous uncertainty about the lips—in the height and size of the figure, and the carriage of the head and body, the likeness appeared even more startling than I had ever felt it to be yet. But there the resemblance ended, and the dissimilarity, in details, began. The delicate beauty of Miss Fairlie's complexion, the transparent clearness of her eyes, the smooth purity of her skin, the tender bloom of colour on her lips, were all missing from the worn weary face that was now turned towards mine. Although I hated myself even for thinking such a thing, still, while I looked at the woman before me, the idea would force itself into my mind that one sad change, in the future, was all that was wanting to make the likeness complete, which I now saw

to be so imperfect in detail. If ever sorrow and suffering set their profaning marks on the youth and beauty of Miss Fairlie's face, then, and then only, Anne Catherick and she would be the twin-sisters of chance resemblance, the living reflections of one another.

I shuddered at the thought. There was something horrible in the blind unreasoning distrust of the future which the mere passage of it through my mind seemed to imply. It was a welcome interruption to be roused by feeling Anne Catherick's hand laid on my shoulder. The touch was as stealthy and as sudden as that other touch which had petrified me from head to foot on the night when we first met.

"You are looking at me, and you are thinking of something," she said, with her strange breathless rapidity of utterance. "What is it?"

"Nothing extraordinary," I answered. "I was only wondering how you came here."

"I came with a friend who is very good to me. I have only been here two days."

"And you found your way to this place yesterday?"

"How do you know that?"

"I only guessed it."

She turned from me, and knelt down before the inscription once more.

"Where should I go if not here?" she said. "The friend who was better than a mother to me is the only friend I have to visit at Limmeridge. Oh, it makes my heart ache to see a stain on her tomb! It ought to be kept white as snow, for her sake. I was tempted to begin cleaning it yesterday, and I can't help coming back to go on with it to-day. Is there anything wrong in that? I hope not. Surely nothing can be wrong that I do for Mrs. Fairlie's sake?"

The old grateful sense of her benefactress's kindness was evidently the ruling idea still in the poor creature's mind—the narrow mind which had but too plainly opened to no other lasting impression since that first impression of her younger and happier days. I saw that my best chance of winning her confidence lay in encouraging her to proceed with the artless employment which she had come into the burial-ground to pursue. She resumed it at once, on my telling her she might do so, touching the hard marble as tenderly as if it had been a sentient thing, and whispering the words of the inscription to herself, over and over again, as if the lost days of her girlhood had returned and she was patiently learning her lesson once more at Mrs. Fairlie's knees.

"Should you wonder very much," I said, preparing the way as cautiously as I could for the questions that were to come, "if I owned that it is a satisfaction to me, as well as a surprise, to see you here? I felt very uneasy about you after you left me in the cab."

She looked up quickly and suspiciously.

"Uneasy," she repeated. "Why?"

"A strange thing happened after we parted that night. Two men overtook me in a chaise. They did not see where I was standing, but they stopped near me, and spoke to a policeman on the other side of the way."

She instantly suspended her employment. The hand holding the damp cloth with which she had been cleaning the inscription dropped to her side. The other hand grasped the marble cross at the head of the grave. Her face turned towards me slowly, with the blank look of terror set rigidly on it once more. I went on at all hazards—it was too late now to draw back.

"The two men spoke to the policeman," I said, "and asked him if he had seen you. He had not seen you; and then one of the men spoke again, and said you had escaped from his Asylum."

She sprang to her feet as if my last words had set the pursuers on her track.

“Stop! and hear the end,” I cried. “Stop! and you shall know how I befriended you. A word from me would have told the men which way you had gone—and I never spoke that word. I helped your escape—I made it safe and certain. Think, try to think. Try to understand what I tell you.”

My manner seemed to influence her more than my words. She made an effort to grasp the new idea. Her hands shifted the damp cloth hesitatingly from one to the other, exactly as they had shifted the little travelling-bag on the night when I first saw her. Slowly the purpose of my words seemed to force its way through the confusion and agitation of her mind. Slowly her features relaxed, and her eyes looked at me with their expression gaining in curiosity what it was fast losing in fear.

“YOU don’t think I ought to be back in the Asylum, do you?” she said.

“Certainly not. I am glad you escaped from it—I am glad I helped you.”

“Yes, yes, you did help me indeed; you helped me at the hard part,” she went on a little vacantly. “It was easy to escape, or I should not have got away. They never suspected me as they suspected the others. I was so quiet, and so obedient, and so easily frightened. The finding London was the hard part, and there you helped me. Did I thank you at the time? I thank you now very kindly.”

“Was the Asylum far from where you met me? Come! show that you believe me to be your friend, and tell me where it was.”

She mentioned the place—a private Asylum, as its situation informed me; a private Asylum not very far from the spot where I had seen her—and then, with evident suspicion of the use to which I might put her answer, anxiously repeated her former inquiry, “You don’t think I ought to be taken back, do you?”

“Once again, I am glad you escaped—I am glad you prospered well after you left me,” I answered. “You said you had a friend in London to go to. Did you find the friend?”

“Yes. It was very late, but there was a girl up at needle-work in the house, and she helped me to rouse Mrs. Clements. Mrs. Clements is my friend. A good, kind woman, but not like Mrs. Fairlie. Ah no, nobody is like Mrs. Fairlie!”

“Is Mrs. Clements an old friend of yours? Have you known her a long time?”

“Yes, she was a neighbour of ours once, at home, in Hampshire, and liked me, and took care of me when I was a little girl. Years ago, when she went away from us, she wrote down in my Prayer-book for me where she was going to live in London, and she said, ‘If you are ever in trouble, Anne, come to me. I have no husband alive to say me nay, and no children to look after, and I will take care of you.’ Kind words, were they not? I suppose I remember them because they were kind. It’s little enough I remember besides—little enough, little enough!”

“Had you no father or mother to take care of you?”

“Father?—I never saw him—I never heard mother speak of him. Father? Ah, dear! he is dead, I suppose.”

“And your mother?”

“I don’t get on well with her. We are a trouble and a fear to each other.”

A trouble and a fear to each other! At those words the suspicion crossed my mind, for the first time, that her mother might be the person who had placed her under restraint.

“Don’t ask me about mother,” she went on. “I’d rather talk of Mrs. Clements. Mrs. Clements is like you, she doesn’t think that I ought to be back in the Asylum, and she is as glad as you are that I escaped from it. She cried over my misfortune, and said it must be kept secret from everybody.”

Her "misfortune." In what sense was she using that word? In a sense which might explain her motive in writing the anonymous letter? In a sense which might show it to be the too common and too customary motive that has led many a woman to interpose anonymous hindrances to the marriage of the man who has ruined her? I resolved to attempt the clearing up of this doubt before more words passed between us on either side.

"What misfortune?" I asked.

"The misfortune of my being shut up," she answered, with every appearance of feeling surprised at my question. "What other misfortune could there be?"

I determined to persist, as delicately and forbearingly as possible. It was of very great importance that I should be absolutely sure of every step in the investigation which I now gained in advance.

"There is another misfortune," I said, "to which a woman may be liable, and by which she may suffer lifelong sorrow and shame."

"What is it?" she asked eagerly.

"The misfortune of believing too innocently in her own virtue, and in the faith and honour of the man she loves," I answered.

She looked up at me with the artless bewilderment of a child. Not the slightest confusion or change of colour—not the faintest trace of any secret consciousness of shame struggling to the surface appeared in her face—that face which betrayed every other emotion with such transparent clearness. No words that ever were spoken could have assured me, as her look and manner now assured me, that the motive which I had assigned for her writing the letter and sending it to Miss Fairlie was plainly and distinctly the wrong one. That doubt, at any rate, was now set at rest; but the very removal of it opened a new prospect of uncertainty. The letter, as I knew from positive testimony, pointed at Sir Percival Glyde, though it did not name him. She must have had some strong motive, originating in some deep sense of injury, for secretly denouncing him to Miss Fairlie in such terms as she had employed, and that motive was unquestionably not to be traced to the loss of her innocence and her character. Whatever wrong he might have inflicted on her was not of that nature. Of what nature could it be?

"I don't understand you," she said, after evidently trying hard, and trying in vain, to discover the meaning of the words I had last said to her.

"Never mind," I answered. "Let us go on with what we were talking about. Tell me how long you stayed with Mrs. Clements in London, and how you came here."

"How long?" she repeated. "I stayed with Mrs. Clements till we both came to this place, two days ago."

"You are living in the village, then?" I said. "It is strange I should not have heard of you, though you have only been here two days." "No, no, not in the village. Three miles away at a farm. Do you know the farm? They call it Todd's Corner."

I remembered the place perfectly—we had often passed by it in our drives. It was one of the oldest farms in the neighbourhood, situated in a solitary, sheltered spot, inland at the junction of two hills.

"They are relations of Mrs. Clements at Todd's Corner," she went on, "and they had often asked her to go and see them. She said she would go, and take me with her, for the quiet and the fresh air. It was very kind, was it not? I would have gone anywhere to be quiet, and safe, and out of the way. But when I heard that Todd's Corner was near Limmeridge—oh! I was so happy I would have walked all the way barefoot to get there, and see the schools and the village and Limmeridge House again. They are very good people at Todd's Corner. I hope I shall stay there

a long time. There is only one thing I don't like about them, and don't like about Mrs. Clements——”

“What is it?”

“They will tease me about dressing all in white—they say it looks so particular. How do they know? Mrs. Fairlie knew best. Mrs. Fairlie would never have made me wear this ugly blue cloak! Ah! she was fond of white in her lifetime, and here is white stone about her grave—and I am making it whiter for her sake. She often wore white herself, and she always dressed her little daughter in white. Is Miss Fairlie well and happy? Does she wear white now, as she used when she was a girl?”

Her voice sank when she put the questions about Miss Fairlie, and she turned her head farther and farther away from me. I thought I detected, in the alteration of her manner, an uneasy consciousness of the risk she had run in sending the anonymous letter, and I instantly determined so to frame my answer as to surprise her into owning it.

“Miss Fairlie was not very well or very happy this morning,” I said.

She murmured a few words, but they were spoken so confusedly, and in such a low tone, that I could not even guess at what they meant.

“Did you ask me why Miss Fairlie was neither well nor happy this morning?” I continued.

“No,” she said quickly and eagerly—“oh no, I never asked that.”

“I will tell you without your asking,” I went on. “Miss Fairlie has received your letter.”

She had been down on her knees for some little time past, carefully removing the last weather-stains left about the inscription while we were speaking together. The first sentence of the words I had just addressed to her made her pause in her occupation, and turn slowly without rising from her knees, so as to face me. The second sentence literally petrified her. The cloth she had been holding dropped from her hands—her lips fell apart—all the little colour that there was naturally in her face left it in an instant.

“How do you know?” she said faintly. “Who showed it to you?” The blood rushed back into her face—rushed overwhelmingly, as the sense rushed upon her mind that her own words had betrayed her. She struck her hands together in despair. “I never wrote it,” she gasped affrightedly; “I know nothing about it!”

“Yes,” I said, “you wrote it, and you know about it. It was wrong to send such a letter, it was wrong to frighten Miss Fairlie. If you had anything to say that it was right and necessary for her to hear, you should have gone yourself to Limmeridge House—you should have spoken to the young lady with your own lips.”

She crouched down over the flat stone of the grave, till her face was hidden on it, and made no reply.

“Miss Fairlie will be as good and kind to you as her mother was, if you mean well,” I went on.

“Miss Fairlie will keep your secret, and not let you come to any harm. Will you see her tomorrow at the farm? Will you meet her in the garden at Limmeridge House?”

“Oh, if I could die, and be hidden and at rest with YOU!” Her lips murmured the words close on the grave-stone, murmured them in tones of passionate endearment, to the dead remains beneath. “You know how I love your child, for your sake! Oh, Mrs. Fairlie! Mrs. Fairlie! tell me how to save her. Be my darling and my mother once more, and tell me what to do for the best.”

I heard her lips kissing the stone—I saw her hands beating on it passionately. The sound and the sight deeply affected me. I stooped down, and took the poor helpless hands tenderly in mine, and tried to soothe her.

It was useless. She snatched her hands from me, and never moved her face from the stone. Seeing the urgent necessity of quieting her at any hazard and by any means, I appealed to the only anxiety that she appeared to feel, in connection with me and with my opinion of her—the anxiety to convince me of her fitness to be mistress of her own actions.

“Come, come,” I said gently. “Try to compose yourself, or you will make me alter my opinion of you. Don’t let me think that the person who put you in the Asylum might have had some excuse——”

The next words died away on my lips. The instant I risked that chance reference to the person who had put her in the Asylum she sprang up on her knees. A most extraordinary and startling change passed over her. Her face, at all ordinary times so touching to look at, in its nervous sensitiveness, weakness, and uncertainty, became suddenly darkened by an expression of maniacally intense hatred and fear, which communicated a wild, unnatural force to every feature. Her eyes dilated in the dim evening light, like the eyes of a wild animal. She caught up the cloth that had fallen at her side, as if it had been a living creature that she could kill, and crushed it in both her hands with such convulsive strength, that the few drops of moisture left in it trickled down on the stone beneath her.

“Talk of something else,” she said, whispering through her teeth. “I shall lose myself if you talk of that.”

Every vestige of the gentler thoughts which had filled her mind hardly a minute since seemed to be swept from it now. It was evident that the impression left by Mrs. Fairlie’s kindness was not, as I had supposed, the only strong impression on her memory. With the grateful remembrance of her school-days at Limmeridge, there existed the vindictive remembrance of the wrong inflicted on her by her confinement in the Asylum. Who had done that wrong? Could it really be her mother?

It was hard to give up pursuing the inquiry to that final point, but I forced myself to abandon all idea of continuing it. Seeing her as I saw her now, it would have been cruel to think of anything but the necessity and the humanity of restoring her composure.

“I will talk of nothing to distress you,” I said soothingly.

“You want something,” she answered sharply and suspiciously. “Don’t look at me like that. Speak to me—tell me what you want.”

“I only want you to quiet yourself, and when you are calmer, to think over what I have said.”

“Said?” She paused—twisted the cloth in her hands, back-wards and forwards, and whispered to herself, “What is it he said?” She turned again towards me, and shook her head impatiently. “Why don’t you help me?” she asked, with angry suddenness.

“Yes, yes,” I said, “I will help you, and you will soon remember. I ask you to see Miss Fairlie to-morrow and to tell her the truth about the letter.”

“Ah! Miss Fairlie—Fairlie—Fairlie——”

The mere utterance of the loved familiar name seemed to quiet her. Her face softened and grew like itself again.

“You need have no fear of Miss Fairlie,” I continued, “and no fear of getting into trouble through the letter. She knows so much about it already, that you will have no difficulty in telling her all. There can be little necessity for concealment where there is hardly anything left to conceal. You mention no names in the letter; but Miss Fairlie knows that the person you write of is Sir Percival Glyde——”

The instant I pronounced that name she started to her feet, and a scream burst from her that rang through the churchyard, and made my heart leap in me with the terror of it. The dark

deformity of the expression which had just left her face lowered on it once more, with doubled and trebled intensity. The shriek at the name, the reiterated look of hatred and fear that instantly followed, told all. Not even a last doubt now remained. Her mother was guiltless of imprisoning her in the Asylum. A man had shut her up—and that man was Sir Percival Glyde.

The scream had reached other ears than mine. On one side I heard the door of the sexton's cottage open; on the other I heard the voice of her companion, the woman in the shawl, the woman whom she had spoken of as Mrs. Clements.

"I'm coming! I'm coming!" cried the voice from behind the clump of dwarf trees.

In a moment more Mrs. Clements hurried into view.

"Who are you?" she cried, facing me resolutely as she set her foot on the stile. "How dare you frighten a poor helpless woman like that?"

She was at Anne Catherick's side, and had put one arm around her, before I could answer. "What is it, my dear?" she said. "What has he done to you?"

"Nothing," the poor creature answered. "Nothing. I'm only frightened."

Mrs. Clements turned on me with a fearless indignation, for which I respected her.

"I should be heartily ashamed of myself if I deserved that angry look," I said. "But I do not deserve it. I have unfortunately startled her without intending it. This is not the first time she has seen me. Ask her yourself, and she will tell you that I am incapable of willingly harming her or any woman."

I spoke distinctly, so that Anne Catherick might hear and understand me, and I saw that the words and their meaning had reached her.

"Yes, yes," she said—"he was good to me once—he helped me——" She whispered the rest into her friend's ear.

"Strange, indeed!" said Mrs. Clements, with a look of perplexity. "It makes all the difference, though. I'm sorry I spoke so rough to you, sir; but you must own that appearances looked suspicious to a stranger. It's more my fault than yours, for humouring her whims, and letting her be alone in such a place as this. Come, my dear—come home now."

I thought the good woman looked a little uneasy at the prospect of the walk back, and I offered to go with them until they were both within sight of home. Mrs. Clements thanked me civilly, and declined. She said they were sure to meet some of the farm-labourers as soon as they got to the moor.

"Try to forgive me," I said, when Anne Catherick took her friend's arm to go away. Innocent as I had been of any intention to terrify and agitate her, my heart smote me as I looked at the poor, pale, frightened face.

"I will try," she answered. "But you know too much—I'm afraid you'll always frighten me now."

Mrs. Clements glanced at me, and shook her head pityingly.

"Good-night, sir," she said. "You couldn't help it, I know but I wish it was me you had frightened, and not her."

They moved away a few steps. I thought they had left me, but Anne suddenly stopped, and separated herself from her friend.

"Wait a little," she said. "I must say good-bye."

She returned to the grave, rested both hands tenderly on the marble cross, and kissed it.

"I'm better now," she sighed, looking up at me quietly. "I forgive you."

She joined her companion again, and they left the burial-ground. I saw them stop near the church and speak to the sexton's wife, who had come from the cottage, and had waited, watching

us from a distance. Then they went on again up the path that led to the moor. I looked after Anne Catherick as she disappeared, till all trace of her had faded in the twilight—looked as anxiously and sorrowfully as if that was the last I was to see in this weary world of the woman in white.

XIV

Half an hour later I was back at the house, and was informing Miss Halcombe of all that had happened.

She listened to me from beginning to end with a steady, silent attention, which, in a woman of her temperament and disposition, was the strongest proof that could be offered of the serious manner in which my narrative affected her.

“My mind misgives me,” was all she said when I had done. “My mind misgives me sadly about the future.”

“The future may depend,” I suggested, “on the use we make of the present. It is not improbable that Anne Catherick may speak more readily and unreservedly to a woman than she has spoken to me. If Miss Fairlie——”

“Not to be thought of for a moment,” interposed Miss Halcombe, in her most decided manner.

“Let me suggest, then,” I continued, “that you should see Anne Catherick yourself, and do all you can to win her confidence. For my own part, I shrink from the idea of alarming the poor creature a second time, as I have most unhappily alarmed her already. Do you see any objection to accompanying me to the farmhouse to-morrow?”

“None whatever. I will go anywhere and do anything to serve Laura’s interests. What did you say the place was called?”

“You must know it well. It is called Todd’s Corner.”

“Certainly. Todd’s Corner is one of Mr. Fairlie’s farms. Our dairymaid here is the farmer’s second daughter. She goes backwards and forwards constantly between this house and her father’s farm, and she may have heard or seen something which it may be useful to us to know. Shall I ascertain, at once, if the girl is downstairs?”

She rang the bell, and sent the servant with his message. He returned, and announced that the dairymaid was then at the farm. She had not been there for the last three days, and the housekeeper had given her leave to go home for an hour or two that evening.

“I can speak to her to-morrow,” said Miss Halcombe, when the servant had left the room again. “In the meantime, let me thoroughly understand the object to be gained by my interview with Anne Catherick. Is there no doubt in your mind that the person who confined her in the Asylum was Sir Percival Glyde?”

“There is not the shadow of a doubt. The only mystery that remains is the mystery of his MOTIVE. Looking to the great difference between his station in life and hers, which seems to preclude all idea of the most distant relationship between them, it is of the last importance—even assuming that she really required to be placed under restraint—to know why HE should have been the person to assume the serious responsibility of shutting her up——”

“In a private Asylum, I think you said?”

“Yes, in a private Asylum, where a sum of money, which no poor person could afford to give, must have been paid for her maintenance as a patient.”

“I see where the doubt lies, Mr. Hartright, and I promise you that it shall be set at rest, whether Anne Catherick assists us to-morrow or not. Sir Percival Glyde shall not be long in this house without satisfying Mr. Gilmore, and satisfying me. My sister’s future is my dearest care in life, and I have influence enough over her to give me some power, where her marriage is concerned, in the disposal of it.”

We parted for the night.

After breakfast the next morning, an obstacle, which the events of the evening before had put out of my memory, interposed to prevent our proceeding immediately to the farm. This was my last day at Limmeridge House, and it was necessary, as soon as the post came in, to follow Miss Halcombe’s advice, and to ask Mr. Fairlie’s permission to shorten my engagement by a month, in consideration of an unforeseen necessity for my return to London.

Fortunately for the probability of this excuse, so far as appearances were concerned, the post brought me two letters from London friends that morning. I took them away at once to my own room, and sent the servant with a message to Mr. Fairlie, requesting to know when I could see him on a matter of business.

I awaited the man’s return, free from the slightest feeling of anxiety about the manner in which his master might receive my application. With Mr. Fairlie’s leave or without it, I must go. The consciousness of having now taken the first step on the dreary journey which was henceforth to separate my life from Miss Fairlie’s seemed to have blunted my sensibility to every consideration connected with myself. I had done with my poor man’s touchy pride—I had done with all my little artist vanities. No insolence of Mr. Fairlie’s, if he chose to be insolent, could wound me now.

The servant returned with a message for which I was not unprepared. Mr. Fairlie regretted that the state of his health, on that particular morning, was such as to preclude all hope of his having the pleasure of receiving me. He begged, therefore, that I would accept his apologies, and kindly communicate what I had to say in the form of a letter. Similar messages to this had reached me, at various intervals, during my three months’ residence in the house. Throughout the whole of that period Mr. Fairlie had been rejoiced to “possess” me, but had never been well enough to see me for a second time. The servant took every fresh batch of drawings that I mounted and restored back to his master with my “respects,” and returned empty-handed with Mr. Fairlie’s “kind compliments,” “best thanks,” and “sincere regrets” that the state of his health still obliged him to remain a solitary prisoner in his own room. A more satisfactory arrangement to both sides could not possibly have been adopted. It would be hard to say which of us, under the circumstances, felt the most grateful sense of obligation to Mr. Fairlie’s accommodating nerves.

I sat down at once to write the letter, expressing myself in it as civilly, as clearly, and as briefly as possible. Mr. Fairlie did not hurry his reply. Nearly an hour elapsed before the answer was placed in my hands. It was written with beautiful regularity and neatness of character, in violet-coloured ink, on note-paper as smooth as ivory and almost as thick as cardboard, and it addressed me in these terms:—

“Mr. Fairlie’s compliments to Mr. Hartright. Mr. Fairlie is more surprised and disappointed than he can say (in the present state of his health) by Mr. Hartright’s application. Mr. Fairlie is not a man of business, but he has consulted his steward, who is, and that person confirms Mr. Fairlie’s opinion that Mr. Hartright’s request to be allowed to break his engagement cannot be justified by any necessity whatever, excepting perhaps a case of life and death. If the highly-appreciative feeling towards Art and its professors, which it is the consolation and happiness of

Mr. Fairlie's suffering existence to cultivate, could be easily shaken, Mr. Hartright's present proceeding would have shaken it. It has not done so—except in the instance of Mr. Hartright himself.

“Having stated his opinion—so far, that is to say, as acute nervous suffering will allow him to state anything—Mr. Fairlie has nothing to add but the expression of his decision, in reference to the highly irregular application that has been made to him. Perfect repose of body and mind being to the last degree important in his case, Mr. Fairlie will not suffer Mr. Hartright to disturb that repose by remaining in the house under circumstances of an essentially irritating nature to both sides. Accordingly, Mr. Fairlie waives his right of refusal, purely with a view to the preservation of his own tranquillity—and informs Mr. Hartright that he may go.”

I folded the letter up, and put it away with my other papers. The time had been when I should have resented it as an insult—I accepted it now as a written release from my engagement. It was off my mind, it was almost out of my memory, when I went downstairs to the breakfast-room, and informed Miss Halcombe that I was ready to walk with her to the farm.

“Has Mr. Fairlie given you a satisfactory answer?” she asked as we left the house.

“He has allowed me to go, Miss Halcombe.”

She looked up at me quickly, and then, for the first time since I had known her, took my arm of her own accord. No words could have expressed so delicately that she understood how the permission to leave my employment had been granted, and that she gave me her sympathy, not as my superior, but as my friend. I had not felt the man's insolent letter, but I felt deeply the woman's atoning kindness.

On our way to the farm we arranged that Miss Halcombe was to enter the house alone, and that I was to wait outside, within call. We adopted this mode of proceeding from an apprehension that my presence, after what had happened in the churchyard the evening before, might have the effect of renewing Anne Catherick's nervous dread, and of rendering her additionally distrustful of the advances of a lady who was a stranger to her. Miss Halcombe left me, with the intention of speaking, in the first instance, to the farmer's wife (of whose friendly readiness to help her in any way she was well assured), while I waited for her in the near neighbourhood of the house.

I had fully expected to be left alone for some time. To my surprise, however, little more than five minutes had elapsed before Miss Halcombe returned.

“Does Anne Catherick refuse to see you?” I asked in astonishment.

“Anne Catherick is gone,” replied Miss Halcombe.

“Gone?”

“Gone with Mrs. Clements. They both left the farm at eight o'clock this morning.”

I could say nothing—I could only feel that our last chance of discovery had gone with them.

“All that Mrs. Todd knows about her guests, I know,” Miss Halcombe went on, “and it leaves me, as it leaves her, in the dark. They both came back safe last night, after they left you, and they passed the first part of the evening with Mr. Todd's family as usual. Just before supper-time, however, Anne Catherick startled them all by being suddenly seized with faintness. She had had a similar attack, of a less alarming kind, on the day she arrived at the farm; and Mrs. Todd had connected it, on that occasion, with something she was reading at the time in our local newspaper, which lay on the farm table, and which she had taken up only a minute or two before.”

“Does Mrs. Todd know what particular passage in the newspaper affected her in that way?” I inquired.

“No,” replied Miss Halcombe. “She had looked it over, and had seen nothing in it to agitate any one. I asked leave, however, to look it over in my turn, and at the very first page I opened I found that the editor had enriched his small stock of news by drawing upon our family affairs, and had published my sister’s marriage engagement, among his other announcements, copied from the London papers, of Marriages in High Life. I concluded at once that this was the paragraph which had so strangely affected Anne Catherick, and I thought I saw in it, also, the origin of the letter which she sent to our house the next day.”

“There can be no doubt in either case. But what did you hear about her second attack of faintness yesterday evening?”

“Nothing. The cause of it is a complete mystery. There was no stranger in the room. The only visitor was our dairymaid, who, as I told you, is one of Mr. Todd’s daughters, and the only conversation was the usual gossip about local affairs. They heard her cry out, and saw her turn deadly pale, without the slightest apparent reason. Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Clements took her upstairs, and Mrs. Clements remained with her. They were heard talking together until long after the usual bedtime, and early this morning Mrs. Clements took Mrs. Todd aside, and amazed her beyond all power of expression by saying that they must go. The only explanation Mrs. Todd could extract from her guest was, that something had happened, which was not the fault of any one at the farmhouse, but which was serious enough to make Anne Catherick resolve to leave Limmeridge immediately. It was quite useless to press Mrs. Clements to be more explicit. She only shook her head, and said that, for Anne’s sake, she must beg and pray that no one would question her. All she could repeat, with every appearance of being seriously agitated herself, was that Anne must go, that she must go with her, and that the destination to which they might both betake themselves must be kept a secret from everybody. I spare you the recital of Mrs. Todd’s hospitable remonstrances and refusals. It ended in her driving them both to the nearest station, more than three hours since. She tried hard on the way to get them to speak more plainly, but without success; and she set them down outside the station-door, so hurt and offended by the unceremonious abruptness of their departure and their unfriendly reluctance to place the least confidence in her, that she drove away in anger, without so much as stopping to bid them good-bye. That is exactly what has taken place. Search your own memory, Mr. Hartright, and tell me if anything happened in the burial-ground yesterday evening which can at all account for the extraordinary departure of those two women this morning.”

“I should like to account first, Miss Halcombe, for the sudden change in Anne Catherick which alarmed them at the farmhouse, hours after she and I had parted, and when time enough had elapsed to quiet any violent agitation that I might have been unfortunate enough to cause. Did you inquire particularly about the gossip which was going on in the room when she turned faint?”

“Yes. But Mrs. Todd’s household affairs seem to have divided her attention that evening with the talk in the farmhouse parlour. She could only tell me that it was ‘just the news,’—meaning, I suppose, that they all talked as usual about each other.”

“The dairymaid’s memory may be better than her mother’s,” I said. “It may be as well for you to speak to the girl, Miss Halcombe, as soon as we get back.”

My suggestion was acted on the moment we returned to the house. Miss Halcombe led me round to the servants’ offices, and we found the girl in the dairy, with her sleeves tucked up to her shoulders, cleaning a large milk-pan and singing blithely over her work.

“I have brought this gentleman to see your dairy, Hannah,” said Miss Halcombe. “It is one of the sights of the house, and it always does you credit.”

The girl blushed and curtsied, and said shyly that she hoped she always did her best to keep things neat and clean.

"We have just come from your father's," Miss Halcombe continued. "You were there yesterday evening, I hear, and you found visitors at the house?"

"Yes, miss."

"One of them was taken faint and ill, I am told. I suppose nothing was said or done to frighten her? You were not talking of anything very terrible, were you?"

"Oh no, miss!" said the girl, laughing. "We were only talking of the news."

"Your sisters told you the news at Todd's Corner, I suppose?"

"Yes, miss."

"And you told them the news at Limmeridge House?"

"Yes, miss. And I'm quite sure nothing was said to frighten the poor thing, for I was talking when she was taken ill. It gave me quite a turn, miss, to see it, never having been taken faint myself."

Before any more questions could be put to her, she was called away to receive a basket of eggs at the dairy door. As she left us I whispered to Miss Halcombe—

"Ask her if she happened to mention, last night, that visitors were expected at Limmeridge House."

Miss Halcombe showed me, by a look, that she understood, and put the question as soon as the dairymaid returned to us.

"Oh yes, miss, I mentioned that," said the girl simply. "The company coming, and the accident to the brindled cow, was all the news I had to take to the farm."

"Did you mention names? Did you tell them that Sir Percival Glyde was expected on Monday?"

"Yes, miss—I told them Sir Percival Glyde was coming. I hope there was no harm in it—I hope I didn't do wrong."

"Oh no, no harm. Come, Mr. Hartright, Hannah will begin to think us in the way, if we interrupt her any longer over her work."

We stopped and looked at one another the moment we were alone again.

"Is there any doubt in your mind, NOW, Miss Halcombe?"

"Sir Percival Glyde shall remove that doubt, Mr. Hartright—or Laura Fairlie shall never be his wife."

XV

As we walked round to the front of the house a fly from the railway approached us along the drive. Miss Halcombe waited on the door-steps until the fly drew up, and then advanced to shake hands with an old gentleman, who got out briskly the moment the steps were let down. Mr. Gilmore had arrived.

I looked at him, when we were introduced to each other, with an interest and a curiosity which I could hardly conceal. This old man was to remain at Limmeridge House after I had left it, he was to hear Sir Percival Glyde's explanation, and was to give Miss Halcombe the assistance of his experience in forming her judgment; he was to wait until the question of the marriage was set at rest; and his hand, if that question were decided in the affirmative, was to draw the settlement

which bound Miss Fairlie irrevocably to her engagement. Even then, when I knew nothing by comparison with what I know now, I looked at the family lawyer with an interest which I had never felt before in the presence of any man breathing who was a total stranger to me.

In external appearance Mr. Gilmore was the exact opposite of the conventional idea of an old lawyer. His complexion was florid—his white hair was worn rather long and kept carefully brushed—his black coat, waistcoat, and trousers fitted him with perfect neatness—his white cravat was carefully tied, and his lavender-coloured kid gloves might have adorned the hands of a fashionable clergyman, without fear and without reproach. His manners were pleasantly marked by the formal grace and refinement of the old school of politeness, quickened by the invigorating sharpness and readiness of a man whose business in life obliges him always to keep his faculties in good working order. A sanguine constitution and fair prospects to begin with—a long subsequent career of creditable and comfortable prosperity—a cheerful, diligent, widely-respected old age—such were the general impressions I derived from my introduction to Mr. Gilmore, and it is but fair to him to add, that the knowledge I gained by later and better experience only tended to confirm them.

I left the old gentleman and Miss Halcombe to enter the house together, and to talk of family matters undisturbed by the restraint of a stranger's presence. They crossed the hall on their way to the drawing-room, and I descended the steps again to wander about the garden alone.

My hours were numbered at Limmeridge House—my departure the next morning was irrevocably settled—my share in the investigation which the anonymous letter had rendered necessary was at an end. No harm could be done to any one but myself if I let my heart loose again, for the little time that was left me, from the cold cruelty of restraint which necessity had forced me to inflict upon it, and took my farewell of the scenes which were associated with the brief dream-time of my happiness and my love.

I turned instinctively to the walk beneath my study-window, where I had seen her the evening before with her little dog, and followed the path which her dear feet had trodden so often, till I came to the wicket gate that led into her rose garden. The winter bareness spread drearily over it now. The flowers that she had taught me to distinguish by their names, the flowers that I had taught her to paint from, were gone, and the tiny white paths that led between the beds were damp and green already. I went on to the avenue of trees, where we had breathed together the warm fragrance of August evenings, where we had admired together the myriad combinations of shade and sunlight that dappled the ground at our feet. The leaves fell about me from the groaning branches, and the earthy decay in the atmosphere chilled me to the bones. A little farther on, and I was out of the grounds, and following the lane that wound gently upward to the nearest hills. The old felled tree by the wayside, on which we had sat to rest, was sodden with rain, and the tuft of ferns and grasses which I had drawn for her, nestling under the rough stone wall in front of us, had turned to a pool of water, stagnating round an island of dragged weeds. I gained the summit of the hill, and looked at the view which we had so often admired in the happier time. It was cold and barren—it was no longer the view that I remembered. The sunshine of her presence was far from me—the charm of her voice no longer murmured in my ear. She had talked to me, on the spot from which I now looked down, of her father, who was her last surviving parent—had told me how fond of each other they had been, and how sadly she missed him still when she entered certain rooms in the house, and when she took up forgotten occupations and amusements with which he had been associated. Was the view that I had seen, while listening to those words, the view that I saw now, standing on the hill-top by myself? I turned and left it—I wound my way back again, over the moor, and round the sandhills, down to

the beach. There was the white rage of the surf, and the multitudinous glory of the leaping waves—but where was the place on which she had once drawn idle figures with her parasol in the sand—the place where we had sat together, while she talked to me about myself and my home, while she asked me a woman's minutely observant questions about my mother and my sister, and innocently wondered whether I should ever leave my lonely chambers and have a wife and a house of my own? Wind and wave had long since smoothed out the trace of her which she had left in those marks on the sand, I looked over the wide monotony of the seaside prospect, and the place in which we two had idled away the sunny hours was as lost to me as if I had never known it, as strange to me as if I stood already on a foreign shore.

The empty silence of the beach struck cold to my heart. I returned to the house and the garden, where traces were left to speak of her at every turn.

On the west terrace walk I met Mr. Gilmore. He was evidently in search of me, for he quickened his pace when we caught sight of each other. The state of my spirits little fitted me for the society of a stranger; but the meeting was inevitable, and I resigned myself to make the best of it.

“You are the very person I wanted to see,” said the old gentleman. “I had two words to say to you, my dear sir; and if you have no objection I will avail myself of the present opportunity. To put it plainly, Miss Halcombe and I have been talking over family affairs—affairs which are the cause of my being here—and in the course of our conversation she was naturally led to tell me of this unpleasant matter connected with the anonymous letter, and of the share which you have most creditably and properly taken in the proceedings so far. That share, I quite understand, gives you an interest which you might not otherwise have felt, in knowing that the future management of the investigation which you have begun will be placed in safe hands. My dear sir, make yourself quite easy on that point—it will be placed in MY hands.”

“You are, in every way, Mr. Gilmore, much fitter to advise and to act in the matter than I am. Is it an indiscretion on my part to ask if you have decided yet on a course of proceeding?”

“So far as it is possible to decide, Mr. Hartright, I have decided. I mean to send a copy of the letter, accompanied by a statement of the circumstances, to Sir Percival Glyde's solicitor in London, with whom I have some acquaintance. The letter itself I shall keep here to show to Sir Percival as soon as he arrives. The tracing of the two women I have already provided for, by sending one of Mr. Fairlie's servants—a confidential person—to the station to make inquiries. The man has his money and his directions, and he will follow the women in the event of his finding any clue. This is all that can be done until Sir Percival comes on Monday. I have no doubt myself that every explanation which can be expected from a gentleman and a man of honour, he will readily give. Sir Percival stands very high, sir—an eminent position, a reputation above suspicion—I feel quite easy about results—quite easy, I am rejoiced to assure you. Things of this sort happen constantly in my experience. Anonymous letters—unfortunate woman—sad state of society. I don't deny that there are peculiar complications in this case; but the case itself is, most unhappily, common—common.”

“I am afraid, Mr. Gilmore, I have the misfortune to differ from you in the view I take of the case.”

“Just so, my dear sir—just so. I am an old man, and I take the practical view. You are a young man, and you take the romantic view. Let us not dispute about our views. I live professionally in an atmosphere of disputation, Mr. Hartright, and I am only too glad to escape from it, as I am escaping here. We will wait for events—yes, yes, yes—we will wait for events. Charming place this. Good shooting? Probably not, none of Mr. Fairlie's land is preserved, I think. Charming

place, though, and delightful people. You draw and paint, I hear, Mr. Hartright? Envious accomplishment. What style?"

We dropped into general conversation, or rather, Mr. Gilmore talked and I listened. My attention was far from him, and from the topics on which he discoursed so fluently. The solitary walk of the last two hours had wrought its effect on me—it had set the idea in my mind of hastening my departure from Limmeridge House. Why should I prolong the hard trial of saying farewell by one unnecessary minute? What further service was required of me by any one? There was no useful purpose to be served by my stay in Cumberland—there was no restriction of time in the permission to leave which my employer had granted to me. Why not end it there and then?

I determined to end it. There were some hours of daylight still left—there was no reason why my journey back to London should not begin on that afternoon. I made the first civil excuse that occurred to me for leaving Mr. Gilmore, and returned at once to the house.

On my way up to my own room I met Miss Halcombe on the stairs. She saw, by the hurry of my movements and the change in my manner, that I had some new purpose in view, and asked what had happened.

I told her the reasons which induced me to think of hastening my departure, exactly as I have told them here.

"No, no," she said, earnestly and kindly, "leave us like a friend—break bread with us once more. Stay here and dine, stay here and help us to spend our last evening with you as happily, as like our first evenings, as we can. It is my invitation—Mrs. Vesey's invitation——" she hesitated a little, and then added, "Laura's invitation as well."

I promised to remain. God knows I had no wish to leave even the shadow of a sorrowful impression with any one of them.

My own room was the best place for me till the dinner bell rang. I waited there till it was time to go downstairs.

I had not spoken to Miss Fairlie—I had not even seen her—all that day. The first meeting with her, when I entered the drawing-room, was a hard trial to her self-control and to mine. She, too, had done her best to make our last evening renew the golden bygone time—the time that could never come again. She had put on the dress which I used to admire more than any other that she possessed—a dark blue silk, trimmed quaintly and prettily with old-fashioned lace; she came forward to meet me with her former readiness—she gave me her hand with the frank, innocent good-will of happier days. The cold fingers that trembled round mine—the pale cheeks with a bright red spot burning in the midst of them—the faint smile that struggled to live on her lips and died away from them while I looked at it, told me at what sacrifice of herself her outward composure was maintained. My heart could take her no closer to me, or I should have loved her then as I had never loved her yet.

Mr. Gilmore was a great assistance to us. He was in high good-humour, and he led the conversation with unflagging spirit. Miss Halcombe seconded him resolutely, and I did all I could to follow her example. The kind blue eyes, whose slightest changes of expression I had learnt to interpret so well, looked at me appealingly when we first sat down to table. Help my sister—the sweet anxious face seemed to say—help my sister, and you will help me.

We got through the dinner, to all outward appearance at least, happily enough. When the ladies had risen from table, and Mr. Gilmore and I were left alone in the dining-room, a new interest presented itself to occupy our attention, and to give me an opportunity of quieting myself by a few minutes of needful and welcome silence. The servant who had been despatched to trace

Anne Catherick and Mrs. Clements returned with his report, and was shown into the dining-room immediately.

“Well,” said Mr. Gilmore, “what have you found out?”

“I have found out, sir,” answered the man, “that both the women took tickets at our station here for Carlisle.”

“You went to Carlisle, of course, when you heard that?”

“I did, sir, but I am sorry to say I could find no further trace of them.”

“You inquired at the railway?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And at the different inns?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you left the statement I wrote for you at the police station?”

“I did, sir.”

“Well, my friend, you have done all you could, and I have done all I could, and there the matter must rest till further notice. We have played our trump cards, Mr. Hartright,” continued the old gentleman when the servant had withdrawn. “For the present, at least, the women have outmanoeuvred us, and our only resource now is to wait till Sir Percival Glyde comes here on Monday next. Won’t you fill your glass again? Good bottle of port, that—sound, substantial, old wine. I have got better in my own cellar, though.”

We returned to the drawing-room—the room in which the happiest evenings of my life had been passed—the room which, after this last night, I was never to see again. Its aspect was altered since the days had shortened and the weather had grown cold. The glass doors on the terrace side were closed, and hidden by thick curtains. Instead of the soft twilight obscurity, in which we used to sit, the bright radiant glow of lamplight now dazzled my eyes. All was changed—in-doors and out all was changed.

Miss Halcombe and Mr. Gilmore sat down together at the card-table— Mrs. Vesey took her customary chair. There was no restraint on the disposal of THEIR evening, and I felt the restraint on the disposal of mine all the more painfully from observing it. I saw Miss Fairlie lingering near the music-stand. The time had been when I might have joined her there. I waited irresolutely—I knew neither where to go nor what to do next. She cast one quick glance at me, took a piece of music suddenly from the stand, and came towards me of her own accord.

“Shall I play some of those little melodies of Mozart’s which you used to like so much?” she asked, opening the music nervously, and looking down at it while she spoke.

Before I could thank her she hastened to the piano. The chair near it, which I had always been accustomed to occupy, stood empty. She struck a few chords—then glanced round at me—then looked back again at her music.

“Won’t you take your old place?” she said, speaking very abruptly and in very low tones.

“I may take it on the last night,” I answered.

She did not reply—she kept her attention riveted on the music— music which she knew by memory, which she had played over and over again, in former times, without the book. I only knew that she had heard me, I only knew that she was aware of my being close to her, by seeing the red spot on the cheek that was nearest to me fade out, and the face grow pale all over.

“I am very sorry you are going,” she said, her voice almost sinking to a whisper, her eyes looking more and more intently at the music, her fingers flying over the keys of the piano with a strange feverish energy which I had never noticed in her before.

“I shall remember those kind words, Miss Fairlie, long after to-morrow has come and gone.”

The paleness grew whiter on her face, and she turned it farther away from me.

“Don’t speak of to-morrow,” she said. “Let the music speak to us of to-night, in a happier language than ours.”

Her lips trembled—a faint sigh fluttered from them, which she tried vainly to suppress. Her fingers wavered on the piano—she struck a false note, confused herself in trying to set it right, and dropped her hands angrily on her lap. Miss Halcombe and Mr. Gilmore looked up in astonishment from the card-table at which they were playing. Even Mrs. Vesey, dozing in her chair, woke at the sudden cessation of the music, and inquired what had happened.

“You play at whist, Mr. Hartright?” asked Miss Halcombe, with her eyes directed significantly at the place I occupied.

I knew what she meant—I knew she was right, and I rose at once to go to the card-table. As I left the piano Miss Fairlie turned a page of the music, and touched the keys again with a surer hand.

“I WILL play it,” she said, striking the notes almost passionately. “I WILL play it on the last night.”

“Come, Mrs. Vesey,” said Miss Halcombe, “Mr. Gilmore and I are tired of ecarte—come and be Mr. Hartright’s partner at whist.”

The old lawyer smiled satirically. His had been the winning hand, and he had just turned up a king. He evidently attributed Miss Halcombe’s abrupt change in the card-table arrangements to a lady’s inability to play the losing game.

The rest of the evening passed without a word or a look from her. She kept her place at the piano, and I kept mine at the card-table. She played unintermittingly—played as if the music was her only refuge from herself. Sometimes her fingers touched the notes with a lingering fondness—a soft, plaintive, dying tenderness, unutterably beautiful and mournful to hear; sometimes they faltered and failed her, or hurried over the instrument mechanically, as if their task was a burden to them. But still, change and waver as they might in the expression they imparted to the music, their resolution to play never faltered. She only rose from the piano when we all rose to say Good-night.

Mrs. Vesey was the nearest to the door, and the first to shake hands with me.

“I shall not see you again, Mr. Hartright,” said the old lady. “I am truly sorry you are going away. You have been very kind and attentive, and an old woman like me feels kindness and attention. I wish you happy, sir—I wish you a kind good-bye.”

Mr. Gilmore came next.

“I hope we shall have a future opportunity of bettering our acquaintance, Mr. Hartright. You quite understand about that little matter of business being safe in my hands? Yes, yes, of course. Bless me, how cold it is! Don’t let me keep you at the door. Bon voyage, my dear sir—bon voyage, as the French say.”

Miss Halcombe followed.

“Half-past seven to-morrow morning,” she said—then added in a whisper, “I have heard and seen more than you think. Your conduct to-night has made me your friend for life.”

Miss Fairlie came last. I could not trust myself to look at her when I took her hand, and when I thought of the next morning.

“My departure must be a very early one,” I said. “I shall be gone, Miss Fairlie, before you—”

“No, no,” she interposed hastily, “not before I am out of my room. I shall be down to breakfast with Marian. I am not so ungrateful, not so forgetful of the past three months——”

Her voice failed her, her hand closed gently round mine—then dropped it suddenly. Before I could say “Good-night” she was gone.

The end comes fast to meet me—comes inevitably, as the light of the last morning came at Limmeridge House.

It was barely half-past seven when I went downstairs, but I found them both at the breakfast-table waiting for me. In the chill air, in the dim light, in the gloomy morning silence of the house, we three sat down together, and tried to eat, tried to talk. The struggle to preserve appearances was hopeless and useless, and I rose to end it.

As I held out my hand, as Miss Halcombe, who was nearest to me, took it, Miss Fairlie turned away suddenly and hurried from the room.

“Better so,” said Miss Halcombe, when the door had closed—“better so, for you and for her.”

I waited a moment before I could speak—it was hard to lose her, without a parting word or a parting look. I controlled myself—I tried to take leave of Miss Halcombe in fitting terms; but all the farewell words I would fain have spoken dwindled to one sentence.

“Have I deserved that you should write to me?” was all I could say.

“You have nobly deserved everything that I can do for you, as long as we both live. Whatever the end is you shall know it.”

“And if I can ever be of help again, at any future time, long after the memory of my presumption and my folly is forgotten “

I could add no more. My voice faltered, my eyes moistened in spite of me.

She caught me by both hands—she pressed them with the strong, steady grasp of a man—her dark eyes glittered—her brown complexion flushed deep—the force and energy of her face glowed and grew beautiful with the pure inner light of her generosity and her pity.

“I will trust you—if ever the time comes I will trust you as my friend and HER friend, as my brother and HER brother.” She stopped, drew me nearer to her—the fearless, noble creature—touched my forehead, sister-like, with her lips, and called me by my Christian name. “God bless you, Walter!” she said. “Wait here alone and compose yourself—I had better not stay for both our sakes—I had better see you go from the balcony upstairs.”

She left the room. I turned away towards the window, where nothing faced me but the lonely autumn landscape—I turned away to master myself, before I too left the room in my turn, and left it for ever.

A minute passed—it could hardly have been more—when I heard the door open again softly, and the rustling of a woman’s dress on the carpet moved towards me. My heart beat violently as I turned round. Miss Fairlie was approaching me from the farther end of the room.

She stopped and hesitated when our eyes met, and when she saw that we were alone. Then, with that courage which women lose so often in the small emergency, and so seldom in the great, she came on nearer to me, strangely pale and strangely quiet, drawing one hand after her along the table by which she walked, and holding something at her side in the other, which was hidden by the folds of her dress.

“I only went into the drawing-room,” she said, “to look for this. It may remind you of your visit here, and of the friends you leave behind you. You told me I had improved very much when I did it, and I thought you might like——”

She turned her head away, and offered me a little sketch, drawn throughout by her own pencil, of the summer-house in which we had first met. The paper trembled in her hand as she held it out to me—trembled in mine as I took it from her.

I was afraid to say what I felt—I only answered, “It shall never leave me—all my life long it shall be the treasure that I prize most. I am very grateful for it—very grateful to you, for not letting me go away without bidding you good-bye.”

“Oh!” she said innocently, “how could I let you go, after we have passed so many happy days together!”

“Those days may never return, Miss Fairlie—my way of life and yours are very far apart. But if a time should come, when the devotion of my whole heart and soul and strength will give you a moment’s happiness, or spare you a moment’s sorrow, will you try to remember the poor drawing-master who has taught you? Miss Halcombe has promised to trust me—will you promise too?”

The farewell sadness in the kind blue eyes shone dimly through her gathering tears.

“I promise it,” she said in broken tones. “Oh, don’t look at me like that! I promise it with all my heart.”

I ventured a little nearer to her, and held out my hand.

“You have many friends who love you, Miss Fairlie. Your happy future is the dear object of many hopes. May I say, at parting, that it is the dear object of MY hopes too?”

The tears flowed fast down her cheeks. She rested one trembling hand on the table to steady herself while she gave me the other. I took it in mine—I held it fast. My head drooped over it, my tears fell on it, my lips pressed it—not in love; oh, not in love, at that last moment, but in the agony and the self- abandonment of despair.

“For God’s sake, leave me!” she said faintly.

The confession of her heart’s secret burst from her in those pleading words. I had no right to hear them, no right to answer them—they were the words that banished me, in the name of her sacred weakness, from the room. It was all over. I dropped her hand, I said no more. The blinding tears shut her out from my eyes, and I dashed them away to look at her for the last time. One look as she sank into a chair, as her arms fell on the table, as her fair head dropped on them wearily. One farewell look, and the door had closed upon her—the great gulf of separation had opened between us—the image of Laura Fairlie was a memory of the past already.

The End of Hartright’s Narrative.