

## THE SECOND EPOCH

*The Story continued by Marian Halcombe.*

I

...

### BLACKWATER PARK, HAMPSHIRE.

June 11th, 1850.—Six months to look back on—six long, lonely months since Laura and I last saw each other!

How many days have I still to wait? Only one! To-morrow, the twelfth, the travellers return to England. I can hardly realise my own happiness—I can hardly believe that the next four-and-twenty hours will complete the last day of separation between Laura and me.

She and her husband have been in Italy all the winter, and afterwards in the Tyrol. They come back, accompanied by Count Fosco and his wife, who propose to settle somewhere in the neighbourhood of London, and who have engaged to stay at Blackwater Park for the summer months before deciding on a place of residence. So long as Laura returns, no matter who returns with her. Sir Percival may fill the house from floor to ceiling, if he likes, on condition that his wife and I inhabit it together.

Meanwhile, here I am, established at Blackwater Park, “the ancient and interesting seat” (as the county history obligingly informs me) “of Sir Percival Glyde, Bart.,” and the future abiding-place (as I may now venture to add on my account) of plain Marian Halcombe, spinster, now settled in a snug little sitting-room, with a cup of tea by her side, and all her earthly possessions ranged round her in three boxes and a bag.

I left Limmeridge yesterday, having received Laura’s delightful letter from Paris the day before. I had been previously uncertain whether I was to meet them in London or in Hampshire, but this last letter informed me that Sir Percival proposed to land at Southampton, and to travel straight on to his country-house. He has spent so much money abroad that he has none left to defray the expenses of living in London for the remainder of the season, and he is economically resolved to pass the summer and autumn quietly at Blackwater. Laura has had more than enough of excitement and change of scene, and is pleased at the prospect of country tranquillity and retirement which her husband’s prudence provides for her. As for me, I am ready to be happy anywhere in her society. We are all, therefore, well contented in our various ways, to begin with.

Last night I slept in London, and was delayed there so long to-day by various calls and commissions, that I did not reach Blackwater this evening till after dusk.

Judging by my vague impressions of the place thus far, it is the exact opposite of Limmeridge.

The house is situated on a dead flat, and seems to be shut in—almost suffocated, to my north-country notions, by trees. I have seen nobody but the man-servant who opened the door to me, and the housekeeper, a very civil person, who showed me the way to my own room, and got me my tea. I have a nice little boudoir and bedroom, at the end of a long passage on the first floor. The servants and some of the spare rooms are on the second floor, and all the living rooms are on the ground floor. I have not seen one of them yet, and I know nothing about the house, except that one wing of it is said to be five hundred years old, that it had a moat round it once, and that it gets its name of Blackwater from a lake in the park.

Eleven o'clock has just struck, in a ghostly and solemn manner, from a turret over the centre of the house, which I saw when I came in. A large dog has been woke, apparently by the sound of the bell, and is howling and yawning drearily, somewhere round a corner. I hear echoing footsteps in the passages below, and the iron thumping of bolts and bars at the house door. The servants are evidently going to bed. Shall I follow their example?

No, I am not half sleepy enough. Sleepy, did I say? I feel as if I should never close my eyes again. The bare anticipation of seeing that dear face, and hearing that well-known voice to-morrow, keeps me in a perpetual fever of excitement. If I only had the privileges of a man, I would order out Sir Percival's best horse instantly, and tear away on a night-gallop, eastward, to meet the rising sun—a long, hard, heavy, ceaseless gallop of hours and hours, like the famous highwayman's ride to York. Being, however, nothing but a woman, condemned to patience, propriety, and petticoats for life, I must respect the house-keeper's opinions, and try to compose myself in some feeble and feminine way.

Reading is out of the question—I can't fix my attention on books. Let me try if I can write myself into sleepiness and fatigue. My journal has been very much neglected of late. What can I recall—standing, as I now do, on the threshold of a new life—of persons and events, of chances and changes, during the past six months—the long, weary, empty interval since Laura's wedding-day?

Walter Hartright is uppermost in my memory, and he passes first in the shadowy procession of my absent friends. I received a few lines from him, after the landing of the expedition in Honduras, written more cheerfully and hopefully than he has written yet. A month or six weeks later I saw an extract from an American newspaper, describing the departure of the adventurers on their inland journey. They were last seen entering a wild primeval forest, each man with his rifle on his shoulder and his baggage at his back. Since that time, civilisation has lost all trace of them. Not a line more have I received from Walter, not a fragment of news from the expedition has appeared in any of the public journals.

The same dense, disheartening obscurity hangs over the fate and fortunes of Anne Catherick, and her companion, Mrs. Clements. Nothing whatever has been heard of either of them. Whether they are in the country or out of it, whether they are living or dead, no one knows. Even Sir Percival's solicitor has lost all hope, and has ordered the useless search after the fugitives to be finally given up.

Our good old friend Mr. Gilmore has met with a sad check in his active professional career. Early in the spring we were alarmed by hearing that he had been found insensible at his desk, and that the seizure was pronounced to be an apoplectic fit. He had been long complaining of fulness and oppression in the head, and his doctor had warned him of the consequences that would follow his persistency in continuing to work, early and late, as if he were still a young man. The result now is that he has been positively ordered to keep out of his office for a year to come, at least, and to seek repose of body and relief of mind by altogether changing his usual mode of life. The business is left, accordingly, to be carried on by his partner, and he is himself, at this moment, away in Germany, visiting some relations who are settled there in mercantile pursuits. Thus another true friend and trustworthy adviser is lost to us—lost, I earnestly hope and trust, for a time only.

Poor Mrs. Vesey travelled with me as far as London. It was impossible to abandon her to solitude at Limmeridge after Laura and I had both left the house, and we have arranged that she is to live with an unmarried younger sister of hers, who keeps a school at Clapham. She is to come here this autumn to visit her pupil—I might almost say her adopted child. I saw the good

old lady safe to her destination, and left her in the care of her relative, quietly happy at the prospect of seeing Laura again in a few months' time.

As for Mr. Fairlie, I believe I am guilty of no injustice if I describe him as being unutterably relieved by having the house clear of us women. The idea of his missing his niece is simply preposterous—he used to let months pass in the old times without attempting to see her—and in my case and Mrs. Vesey's, I take leave to consider his telling us both that he was half heart-broken at our departure, to be equivalent to a confession that he was secretly rejoiced to get rid of us. His last caprice has led him to keep two photographers incessantly employed in producing sun-pictures of all the treasures and curiosities in his possession. One complete copy of the collection of the photographs is to be presented to the Mechanics' Institution of Carlisle, mounted on the finest cardboard, with ostentatious red-letter inscriptions underneath, "Madonna and Child by Raphael. In the possession of Frederick Fairlie, Esquire." "Copper coin of the period of Tiglath Pileser. In the possession of Frederick Fairlie, Esquire." "Unique Rembrandt etching. Known all over Europe as THE SMUDGE, from a printer's blot in the corner which exists in no other copy. Valued at three hundred guineas. In the possession of Frederick Fairlie, Esq." Dozens of photographs of this sort, and all inscribed in this manner, were completed before I left Cumberland, and hundreds more remain to be done. With this new interest to occupy him, Mr. Fairlie will be a happy man for months and months to come, and the two unfortunate photographers will share the social martyrdom which he has hitherto inflicted on his valet alone.

So much for the persons and events which hold the foremost place in my memory. What next of the one person who holds the foremost place in my heart? Laura has been present to my thoughts all the while I have been writing these lines. What can I recall of her during the past six months, before I close my journal for the night?

I have only her letters to guide me, and on the most important of all the questions which our correspondence can discuss, every one of those letters leaves me in the dark.

Does he treat her kindly? Is she happier now than she was when I parted with her on the wedding-day? All my letters have contained these two inquiries, put more or less directly, now in one form, and now in another, and all, on that point only, have remained without reply, or have been answered as if my questions merely related to the state of her health. She informs me, over and over again, that she is perfectly well—that travelling agrees with her—that she is getting through the winter, for the first time in her life, without catching cold—but not a word can I find anywhere which tells me plainly that she is reconciled to her marriage, and that she can now look back to the twenty-second of December without any bitter feelings of repentance and regret. The name of her husband is only mentioned in her letters, as she might mention the name of a friend who was travelling with them, and who had undertaken to make all the arrangements for the journey. "Sir Percival" has settled that we leave on such a day—"Sir Percival" has decided that we travel by such a road. Sometimes she writes "Percival" only, but very seldom—in nine cases out of ten she gives him his title.

I cannot find that his habits and opinions have changed and coloured hers in any single particular. The usual moral transformation which is insensibly wrought in a young, fresh, sensitive woman by her marriage, seems never to have taken place in Laura. She writes of her own thoughts and impressions, amid all the wonders she has seen, exactly as she might have written to some one else, if I had been travelling with her instead of her husband. I see no betrayal anywhere of sympathy of any kind existing between them. Even when she wanders from the subject of her travels, and occupies herself with the prospects that await her in England, her speculations are busied with her future as my sister, and persistently neglect to notice her future

as Sir Percival's wife. In all this there is no undertone of complaint to warn me that she is absolutely unhappy in her married life. The impression I have derived from our correspondence does not, thank God, lead me to any such distressing conclusion as that. I only see a sad torpor, an unchangeable indifference, when I turn my mind from her in the old character of a sister, and look at her, through the medium of her letters, in the new character of a wife. In other words, it is always Laura Fairlie who has been writing to me for the last six months, and never Lady Glyde.

The strange silence which she maintains on the subject of her husband's character and conduct, she preserves with almost equal resolution in the few references which her later letters contain to the name of her husband's bosom friend, Count Fosco.

For some unexplained reason the Count and his wife appear to have changed their plans abruptly, at the end of last autumn, and to have gone to Vienna instead of going to Rome, at which latter place Sir Percival had expected to find them when he left England. They only quitted Vienna in the spring, and travelled as far as the Tyrol to meet the bride and bridegroom on their homeward journey. Laura writes readily enough about the meeting with Madame Fosco, and assures me that she has found her aunt so much changed for the better—so much quieter, and so much more sensible as a wife than she was as a single woman—that I shall hardly know her again when I see her here. But on the subject of Count Fosco (who interests me infinitely more than his wife), Laura is provokingly circumspect and silent. She only says that he puzzles her, and that she will not tell me what her impression of him is until I have seen him, and formed my own opinion first.

This, to my mind, looks ill for the Count. Laura has preserved, far more perfectly than most people do in later life, the child's subtle faculty of knowing a friend by instinct, and if I am right in assuming that her first impression of Count Fosco has not been favourable, I for one am in some danger of doubting and distrusting that illustrious foreigner before I have so much as set eyes on him. But, patience, patience—this uncertainty, and many uncertainties more, cannot last much longer. To-morrow will see all my doubts in a fair way of being cleared up, sooner or later.

Twelve o'clock has struck, and I have just come back to close these pages, after looking out at my open window.

It is a still, sultry, moonless night. The stars are dull and few. The trees that shut out the view on all sides look dimly black and solid in the distance, like a great wall of rock. I hear the croaking of frogs, faint and far off, and the echoes of the great clock hum in the airless calm long after the strokes have ceased. I wonder how Blackwater Park will look in the daytime? I don't altogether like it by night.

12th.—A day of investigations and discoveries—a more interesting day, for many reasons, than I had ventured to anticipate.

I began my sight-seeing, of course, with the house.

The main body of the building is of the time of that highly- overrated woman, Queen Elizabeth. On the ground floor there are two hugely long galleries, with low ceilings lying parallel with each other, and rendered additionally dark and dismal by hideous family portraits—every one of which I should like to burn. The rooms on the floor above the two galleries are kept in tolerable repair, but are very seldom used. The civil housekeeper, who acted as my guide, offered to show me over them, but considerately added that she feared I should find them rather out of order. My respect for the integrity of my own petticoats and stockings infinitely exceeds my respect for all the Elizabethan bedrooms in the kingdom, so I positively declined exploring the upper regions of dust and dirt at the risk of soiling my nice clean clothes. The housekeeper

said, "I am quite of your opinion, miss," and appeared to think me the most sensible woman she had met with for a long time past.

So much, then, for the main building. Two wings are added at either end of it. The half-ruined wing on the left (as you approach the house) was once a place of residence standing by itself, and was built in the fourteenth century. One of Sir Percival's maternal ancestors—I don't remember, and don't care which—tacked on the main building, at right angles to it, in the aforesaid Queen Elizabeth's time. The housekeeper told me that the architecture of "the old wing," both outside and inside, was considered remarkably fine by good judges. On further investigation I discovered that good judges could only exercise their abilities on Sir Percival's piece of antiquity by previously dismissing from their minds all fear of damp, darkness, and rats. Under these circumstances, I unhesitatingly acknowledged myself to be no judge at all, and suggested that we should treat "the old wing" precisely as we had previously treated the Elizabethan bedrooms. Once more the housekeeper said, "I am quite of your opinion, miss," and once more she looked at me with undisguised admiration of my extraordinary common-sense.

We went next to the wing on the right, which was built, by way of completing the wonderful architectural jumble at Blackwater Park, in the time of George the Second.

This is the habitable part of the house, which has been repaired and redecorated inside on Laura's account. My two rooms, and all the good bedrooms besides, are on the first floor, and the basement contains a drawing-room, a dining-room, a morning-room, a library, and a pretty little boudoir for Laura, all very nicely ornamented in the bright modern way, and all very elegantly furnished with the delightful modern luxuries. None of the rooms are anything like so large and airy as our rooms at Limmeridge, but they all look pleasant to live in. I was terribly afraid, from what I had heard of Blackwater Park, of fatiguing antique chairs, and dismal stained glass, and musty, frouzy hangings, and all the barbarous lumber which people born without a sense of comfort accumulate about them, in defiance of the consideration due to the convenience of their friends. It is an inexpressible relief to find that the nineteenth century has invaded this strange future home of mine, and has swept the dirty "good old times" out of the way of our daily life.

I dawdled away the morning—part of the time in the rooms downstairs, and part out of doors in the great square which is formed by the three sides of the house, and by the lofty iron railings and gates which protect it in front. A large circular fishpond with stone sides, and an allegorical leaden monster in the middle, occupies the centre of the square. The pond itself is full of gold and silver fish, and is encircled by a broad belt of the softest turf I ever walked on. I loitered here on the shady side pleasantly enough till luncheon-time, and after that took my broad straw hat and wandered out alone in the warm lovely sunlight to explore the grounds.

Daylight confirmed the impression which I had felt the night before, of there being too many trees at Blackwater. The house is stifled by them. They are, for the most part, young, and planted far too thickly. I suspect there must have been a ruinous cutting down of timber all over the estate before Sir Percival's time, and an angry anxiety on the part of the next possessor to fill up all the gaps as thickly and rapidly as possible. After looking about me in front of the house, I observed a flower-garden on my left hand, and walked towards it to see what I could discover in that direction.

On a nearer view the garden proved to be small and poor and ill kept. I left it behind me, opened a little gate in a ring fence, and found myself in a plantation of fir-trees.

A pretty winding path, artificially made, led me on among the trees, and my north-country experience soon informed me that I was approaching sandy, heathy ground. After a walk of more

than half a mile, I should think, among the firs, the path took a sharp turn—the trees abruptly ceased to appear on either side of me, and I found myself standing suddenly on the margin of a vast open space, and looking down at the Blackwater lake from which the house takes its name.

The ground, shelving away below me, was all sand, with a few little heathy hillocks to break the monotony of it in certain places. The lake itself had evidently once flowed to the spot on which I stood, and had been gradually wasted and dried up to less than a third of its former size. I saw its still, stagnant waters, a quarter of a mile away from me in the hollow, separated into pools and ponds by twining reeds and rushes, and little knolls of earth. On the farther bank from me the trees rose thickly again, and shut out the view, and cast their black shadows on the sluggish, shallow water. As I walked down to the lake, I saw that the ground on its farther side was damp and marshy, overgrown with rank grass and dismal willows. The water, which was clear enough on the open sandy side, where the sun shone, looked black and poisonous opposite to me, where it lay deeper under the shade of the spongy banks, and the rank overhanging thickets and tangled trees. The frogs were croaking, and the rats were slipping in and out of the shadowy water, like live shadows themselves, as I got nearer to the marshy side of the lake. I saw here, lying half in and half out of the water, the rotten wreck of an old overturned boat, with a sickly spot of sunlight glimmering through a gap in the trees on its dry surface, and a snake basking in the midst of the spot, fantastically coiled and treacherously still. Far and near the view suggested the same dreary impressions of solitude and decay, and the glorious brightness of the summer sky overhead seemed only to deepen and harden the gloom and barrenness of the wilderness on which it shone. I turned and retraced my steps to the high heathy ground, directing them a little aside from my former path towards a shabby old wooden shed, which stood on the outer skirt of the fir plantation, and which had hitherto been too unimportant to share my notice with the wide, wild prospect of the lake.

On approaching the shed I found that it had once been a boat-house, and that an attempt had apparently been made to convert it afterwards into a sort of rude arbour, by placing inside it a firwood seat, a few stools, and a table. I entered the place, and sat down for a little while to rest and get my breath again.

I had not been in the boat-house more than a minute when it struck me that the sound of my own quick breathing was very strangely echoed by something beneath me. I listened intently for a moment, and heard a low, thick, sobbing breath that seemed to come from the ground under the seat which I was occupying. My nerves are not easily shaken by trifles, but on this occasion I started to my feet in a fright—called out—received no answer—summoned back my recreant courage, and looked under the seat.

There, crouched up in the farthest corner, lay the forlorn cause of my terror, in the shape of a poor little dog—a black and white spaniel. The creature moaned feebly when I looked at it and called to it, but never stirred. I moved away the seat and looked closer. The poor little dog's eyes were glazing fast, and there were spots of blood on its glossy white side. The misery of a weak, helpless, dumb creature is surely one of the saddest of all the mournful sights which this world can show. I lifted the poor dog in my arms as gently as I could, and contrived a sort of makeshift hammock for him to lie in, by gathering up the front of my dress all round him. In this way I took the creature, as painlessly as possible, and as fast as possible, back to the house.

Finding no one in the hall I went up at once to my own sitting-room, made a bed for the dog with one of my old shawls, and rang the bell. The largest and fattest of all possible house-maids answered it, in a state of cheerful stupidity which would have provoked the patience of a saint.

The girl's fat, shapeless face actually stretched into a broad grin at the sight of the wounded creature on the floor.

"What do you see there to laugh at?" I asked, as angrily as if she had been a servant of my own. "Do you know whose dog it is?"

"No, miss, that I certainly don't." She stooped, and looked down at the spaniel's injured side—brightened suddenly with the irradiation of a new idea—and pointing to the wound with a chuckle of satisfaction, said, "That's Baxter's doings, that is."

I was so exasperated that I could have boxed her ears. "Baxter?" I said. "Who is the brute you call Baxter?"

The girl grinned again more cheerfully than ever. "Bless you, miss! Baxter's the keeper, and when he finds strange dogs hunting about, he takes and shoots 'em. It's keeper's dooty miss, I think that dog will die. Here's where he's been shot, ain't it? That's Baxter's doings, that is. Baxter's doings, miss, and Baxter's dooty."

I was almost wicked enough to wish that Baxter had shot the housemaid instead of the dog. Seeing that it was quite useless to expect this densely impenetrable personage to give me any help in relieving the suffering creature at our feet, I told her to request the housekeeper's attendance with my compliments. She went out exactly as she had come in, grinning from ear to ear. As the door closed on her she said to herself softly, "It's Baxter's doings and Baxter's dooty—that's what it is."

The housekeeper, a person of some education and intelligence, thoughtfully brought upstairs with her some milk and some warm water. The instant she saw the dog on the floor she started and changed colour.

"Why, Lord bless me," cried the housekeeper, "that must be Mrs. Catherick's dog!"

"Whose?" I asked, in the utmost astonishment.

"Mrs. Catherick's. You seem to know Mrs. Catherick, Miss Halcombe?"

"Not personally, but I have heard of her. Does she live here? Has she had any news of her daughter?"

"No, Miss Halcombe, she came here to ask for news."

"When?"

"Only yesterday. She said some one had reported that a stranger answering to the description of her daughter had been seen in our neighbourhood. No such report has reached us here, and no such report was known in the village, when I sent to make inquiries there on Mrs. Catherick's account. She certainly brought this poor little dog with her when she came, and I saw it trot out after her when she went away. I suppose the creature strayed into the plantations, and got shot. Where did you find it, Miss Halcombe?"

"In the old shed that looks out on the lake."

"Ah, yes, that is the plantation side, and the poor thing dragged itself, I suppose, to the nearest shelter, as dogs will, to die. If you can moisten its lips with the milk, Miss Halcombe, I will wash the clotted hair from the wound. I am very much afraid it is too late to do any good. However, we can but try."

Mrs. Catherick! The name still rang in my ears, as if the housekeeper had only that moment surprised me by uttering it. While we were attending to the dog, the words of Walter Hartright's caution to me returned to my memory: "If ever Anne Catherick crosses your path, make better use of the opportunity, Miss Halcombe, than I made of it." The finding of the wounded spaniel had led me already to the discovery of Mrs. Catherick's visit to Blackwater Park, and that event

might lead in its turn, to something more. I determined to make the most of the chance which was now offered to me, and to gain as much information as I could.

“Did you say that Mrs. Catherick lived anywhere in this neighbourhood?” I asked.

“Oh dear, no,” said the housekeeper. “She lives at Welmingham, quite at the other end of the county—five-and-twenty miles off, at least.”

“I suppose you have known Mrs. Catherick for some years?”

“On the contrary, Miss Halcombe, I never saw her before she came here yesterday. I had heard of her, of course, because I had heard of Sir Percival’s kindness in putting her daughter under medical care. Mrs. Catherick is rather a strange person in her manners, but extremely respectable-looking. She seemed sorely put out when she found that there was no foundation—none, at least, that any of us could discover—for the report of her daughter having been seen in this neighbourhood.”

“I am rather interested about Mrs. Catherick,” I went on, continuing the conversation as long as possible. “I wish I had arrived here soon enough to see her yesterday. Did she stay for any length of time?”

“Yes,” said the housekeeper, “she stayed for some time; and I think she would have remained longer, if I had not been called away to speak to a strange gentleman—a gentleman who came to ask when Sir Percival was expected back. Mrs. Catherick got up and left at once, when she heard the maid tell me what the visitor’s errand was. She said to me, at parting, that there was no need to tell Sir Percival of her coming here. I thought that rather an odd remark to make, especially to a person in my responsible situation.”

I thought it an odd remark too. Sir Percival had certainly led me to believe, at Limmeridge, that the most perfect confidence existed between himself and Mrs. Catherick. If that was the case, why should she be anxious to have her visit at Blackwater Park kept a secret from him?

“Probably,” I said, seeing that the housekeeper expected me to give my opinion on Mrs. Catherick’s parting words, “probably she thought the announcement of her visit might vex Sir Percival to no purpose, by reminding him that her lost daughter was not found yet. Did she talk much on that subject?”

“Very little,” replied the housekeeper. “She talked principally of Sir Percival, and asked a great many questions about where he had been travelling, and what sort of lady his new wife was. She seemed to be more soured and put out than distressed, by failing to find any traces of her daughter in these parts. ‘I give her up,’ were the last words she said that I can remember; ‘I give her up, ma’am, for lost.’ And from that she passed at once to her questions about Lady Glyde, wanting to know if she was a handsome, amiable lady, comely and healthy and young—Ah, dear! I thought how it would end. Look, Miss Halcombe, the poor thing is out of its misery at last!”

The dog was dead. It had given a faint, sobbing cry, it had suffered an instant’s convulsion of the limbs, just as those last words, “comely and healthy and young,” dropped from the housekeeper’s lips. The change had happened with startling suddenness—in one moment the creature lay lifeless under our hands.

Eight o’clock. I have just returned from dining downstairs, in solitary state. The sunset is burning redly on the wilderness of trees that I see from my window, and I am poring over my journal again, to calm my impatience for the return of the travellers. They ought to have arrived, by my calculations, before this. How still and lonely the house is in the drowsy evening quiet! Oh me! how many minutes more before I hear the carriage wheels and run downstairs to find myself in Laura’s arms?

The poor little dog! I wish my first day at Blackwater Park had not been associated with death, though it is only the death of a stray animal.

Welmingham—I see, on looking back through these private pages of mine, that Welmingham is the name of the place where Mrs. Catherick lives. Her note is still in my possession, the note in answer to that letter about her unhappy daughter which Sir Percival obliged me to write. One of these days, when I can find a safe opportunity, I will take the note with me by way of introduction, and try what I can make of Mrs. Catherick at a personal interview. I don't understand her wishing to conceal her visit to this place from Sir Percival's knowledge, and I don't feel half so sure, as the housekeeper seems to do, that her daughter Anne is not in the neighbourhood after all. What would Walter Hartright have said in this emergency? Poor, dear Hartright! I am beginning to feel the want of his honest advice and his willing help already.

Surely I heard something. Was it a bustle of footsteps below stairs? Yes! I hear the horses' feet—I hear the rolling wheels——

## II

June 15th.—The confusion of their arrival has had time to subside. Two days have elapsed since the return of the travellers, and that interval has sufficed to put the new machinery of our lives at Blackwater Park in fair working order. I may now return to my journal, with some little chance of being able to continue the entries in it as collectedly as usual.

I think I must begin by putting down an odd remark which has suggested itself to me since Laura came back.

When two members of a family or two intimate friends are separated, and one goes abroad and one remains at home, the return of the relative or friend who has been travelling always seems to place the relative or friend who has been staying at home at a painful disadvantage when the two first meet. The sudden encounter of the new thoughts and new habits eagerly gained in the one case, with the old thoughts and old habits passively preserved in the other, seems at first to part the sympathies of the most loving relatives and the fondest friends, and to set a sudden strangeness, unexpected by both and uncontrollable by both, between them on either side. After the first happiness of my meeting with Laura was over, after we had sat down together hand in hand to recover breath enough and calmness enough to talk, I felt this strangeness instantly, and I could see that she felt it too. It has partially worn away, now that we have fallen back into most of our old habits, and it will probably disappear before long. But it has certainly had an influence over the first impressions that I have formed of her, now that we are living together again—for which reason only I have thought fit to mention it here.

She has found me unaltered, but I have found her changed.

Changed in person, and in one respect changed in character. I cannot absolutely say that she is less beautiful than she used to be—I can only say that she is less beautiful to me.

Others, who do not look at her with my eyes and my recollections, would probably think her improved. There is more colour and more decision and roundness of outline in her face than there used to be, and her figure seems more firmly set and more sure and easy in all its movements than it was in her maiden days. But I miss something when I look at her—something that once belonged to the happy, innocent life of Laura Fairlie, and that I cannot find in Lady Glyde. There was in the old times a freshness, a softness, an ever-varying and yet ever-remaining

tenderness of beauty in her face, the charm of which it is not possible to express in words, or, as poor Hartright used often to say, in painting either. This is gone. I thought I saw the faint reflection of it for a moment when she turned pale under the agitation of our sudden meeting on the evening of her return, but it has never reappeared since. None of her letters had prepared me for a personal change in her. On the contrary, they had led me to expect that her marriage had left her, in appearance at least, quite unaltered. Perhaps I read her letters wrongly in the past, and am now reading her face wrongly in the present? No matter! Whether her beauty has gained or whether it has lost in the last six months, the separation either way has made her own dear self more precious to me than ever, and that is one good result of her marriage, at any rate!

The second change, the change that I have observed in her character, has not surprised me, because I was prepared for it in this case by the tone of her letters. Now that she is at home again, I find her just as unwilling to enter into any details on the subject of her married life as I had previously found her all through the time of our separation, when we could only communicate with each other by writing. At the first approach I made to the forbidden topic she put her hand on my lips with a look and gesture which touchingly, almost painfully, recalled to my memory the days of her girlhood and the happy bygone time when there were no secrets between us.

“Whenever you and I are together, Marian,” she said, “we shall both be happier and easier with one another, if we accept my married life for what it is, and say and think as little about it as possible. I would tell you everything, darling, about myself,” she went on, nervously buckling and unbuckling the ribbon round my waist, “if my confidences could only end there. But they could not—they would lead me into confidences about my husband too; and now I am married, I think I had better avoid them, for his sake, and for your sake, and for mine. I don’t say that they would distress you, or distress me—I wouldn’t have you think that for the world. But—I want to be so happy, now I have got you back again, and I want you to be so happy too——” She broke off abruptly, and looked round the room, my own sitting-room, in which we were talking. “Ah!” she cried, clapping her hands with a bright smile of recognition, “another old friend found already! Your bookcase, Marian—your dear-little-shabby-old-satin-wood bookcase—how glad I am you brought it with you from Limmeridge! And the horrid heavy man’s umbrella, that you always would walk out with when it rained! And first and foremost of all, your own dear, dark, clever, gipsy-face, looking at me just as usual! It is so like home again to be here. How can we make it more like home still? I will put my father’s portrait in your room instead of in mine—and I will keep all my little treasures from Limmeridge here—and we will pass hours and hours every day with these four friendly walls round us. Oh, Marian!” she said, suddenly seating herself on a footstool at my knees, and looking up earnestly in my face, “promise you will never marry, and leave me. It is selfish to say so, but you are so much better off as a single woman—unless—unless you are very fond of your husband—but you won’t be very fond of anybody but me, will you?” She stopped again, crossed my hands on my lap, and laid her face on them. “Have you been writing many letters, and receiving many letters lately?” she asked, in low, suddenly-altered tones. I understood what the question meant, but I thought it my duty not to encourage her by meeting her half way. “Have you heard from him?” she went on, coaxing me to forgive the more direct appeal on which she now ventured, by kissing my hands, upon which her face still rested. “Is he well and happy, and getting on in his profession? Has he recovered himself—and forgotten me?”

She should not have asked those questions. She should have remembered her own resolution, on the morning when Sir Percival held her to her marriage engagement, and when she resigned

the book of Hartright's drawings into my hands for ever. But, ah me! where is the faultless human creature who can persevere in a good resolution, without sometimes failing and falling back? Where is the woman who has ever really torn from her heart the image that has been once fixed in it by a true love? Books tell us that such unearthly creatures have existed—but what does our own experience say in answer to books?

I made no attempt to remonstrate with her: perhaps, because I sincerely appreciated the fearless candour which let me see, what other women in her position might have had reasons for concealing even from their dearest friends—perhaps, because I felt, in my own heart and conscience, that in her place I should have asked the same questions and had the same thoughts. All I could honestly do was to reply that I had not written to him or heard from him lately, and then to turn the conversation to less dangerous topics.

There has been much to sadden me in our interview—my first confidential interview with her since her return. The change which her marriage has produced in our relations towards each other, by placing a forbidden subject between us, for the first time in our lives; the melancholy conviction of the dearth of all warmth of feeling, of all close sympathy, between her husband and herself, which her own unwilling words now force on my mind; the distressing discovery that the influence of that ill-fated attachment still remains (no matter how innocently, how harmlessly) rooted as deeply as ever in her heart—all these are disclosures to sadden any woman who loves her as dearly, and feels for her as acutely, as I do.

There is only one consolation to set against them—a consolation that ought to comfort me, and that does comfort me. All the graces and gentleness of her character—all the frank affection of her nature—all the sweet, simple, womanly charms which used to make her the darling and delight of every one who approached her, have come back to me with herself. Of my other impressions I am sometimes a little inclined to doubt. Of this last, best, happiest of all impressions, I grow more and more certain every hour in the day.

Let me turn, now, from her to her travelling companions. Her husband must engage my attention first. What have I observed in Sir Percival, since his return, to improve my opinion of him?

I can hardly say. Small vexations and annoyances seem to have beset him since he came back, and no man, under those circumstances, is ever presented at his best. He looks, as I think, thinner than he was when he left England. His wearisome cough and his comfortless restlessness have certainly increased. His manner—at least his manner towards me—is much more abrupt than it used to be. He greeted me, on the evening of his return, with little or nothing of the ceremony and civility of former times—no polite speeches of welcome—no appearance of extraordinary gratification at seeing me—nothing but a short shake of the hand, and a sharp “How-d’ye-do, Miss Halcombe—glad to see you again.” He seemed to accept me as one of the necessary fixtures of Blackwater Park, to be satisfied at finding me established in my proper place, and then to pass me over altogether.

Most men show something of their disposition in their own houses, which they have concealed elsewhere, and Sir Percival has already displayed a mania for order and regularity, which is quite a new revelation of him, so far as my previous knowledge of his character is concerned. If I take a book from the library and leave it on the table, he follows me and puts it back again. If I rise from a chair, and let it remain where I have been sitting, he carefully restores it to its proper place against the wall. He picks up stray flower-blossoms from the carpet, and mutters to himself as discontentedly as if they were hot cinders burning holes in it, and he storms at the servants if

there is a crease in the tablecloth, or a knife missing from its place at the dinner-table, as fiercely as if they had personally insulted him.

I have already referred to the small annoyances which appear to have troubled him since his return. Much of the alteration for the worse which I have noticed in him may be due to these. I try to persuade myself that it is so, because I am anxious not to be disheartened already about the future. It is certainly trying to any man's temper to be met by a vexation the moment he sets foot in his own house again, after a long absence, and this annoying circumstance did really happen to Sir Percival in my presence.

On the evening of their arrival the housekeeper followed me into the hall to receive her master and mistress and their guests. The instant he saw her, Sir Percival asked if any one had called lately. The housekeeper mentioned to him, in reply, what she had previously mentioned to me, the visit of the strange gentleman to make inquiries about the time of her master's return. He asked immediately for the gentleman's name. No name had been left. The gentleman's business? No business had been mentioned. What was the gentleman like? The housekeeper tried to describe him, but failed to distinguish the nameless visitor by any personal peculiarity which her master could recognise. Sir Percival frowned, stamped angrily on the floor, and walked on into the house, taking no notice of anybody. Why he should have been so discomposed by a trifle I cannot say—but he was seriously discomposed, beyond all doubt.

Upon the whole, it will be best, perhaps, if I abstain from forming a decisive opinion of his manners, language, and conduct in his own house, until time has enabled him to shake off the anxieties, whatever they may be, which now evidently troubled his mind in secret. I will turn over to a new page, and my pen shall let Laura's husband alone for the present.

The two guests—the Count and Countess Fosco—come next in my catalogue. I will dispose of the Countess first, so as to have done with the woman as soon as possible.

Laura was certainly not chargeable with any exaggeration, in writing me word that I should hardly recognise her aunt again when we met. Never before have I beheld such a change produced in a woman by her marriage as has been produced in Madame Fosco.

As Eleanor Fairlie (aged seven-and-thirty), she was always talking pretentious nonsense, and always worrying the unfortunate men with every small exaction which a vain and foolish woman can impose on long-suffering male humanity. As Madame Fosco (aged three-and-forty), she sits for hours together without saying a word, frozen up in the strangest manner in herself. The hideously ridiculous love-locks which used to hang on either side of her face are now replaced by stiff little rows of very short curls, of the sort one sees in old-fashioned wigs. A plain, matronly cap covers her head, and makes her look, for the first time in her life since I remember her, like a decent woman. Nobody (putting her husband out of the question, of course) now sees in her, what everybody once saw—I mean the structure of the female skeleton, in the upper regions of the collar-bones and the shoulder-blades. Clad in quiet black or grey gowns, made high round the throat—dresses that she would have laughed at, or screamed at, as the whim of the moment inclined her, in her maiden days—she sits speechless in corners; her dry white hands (so dry that the pores of her skin look chalky) incessantly engaged, either in monotonous embroidery work or in rolling up endless cigarettes for the Count's own particular smoking. On the few occasions when her cold blue eyes are off her work, they are generally turned on her husband, with the look of mute submissive inquiry which we are all familiar with in the eyes of a faithful dog. The only approach to an inward thaw which I have yet detected under her outer covering of icy constraint, has betrayed itself, once or twice, in the form of a suppressed tigerish jealousy of any woman in the house (the maids included) to whom the Count speaks, or on

whom he looks with anything approaching to special interest or attention. Except in this one particular, she is always, morning, noon, and night, indoors and out, fair weather or foul, as cold as a statue, and as impenetrable as the stone out of which it is cut. For the common purposes of society the extraordinary change thus produced in her is, beyond all doubt, a change for the better, seeing that it has transformed her into a civil, silent, unobtrusive woman, who is never in the way. How far she is really reformed or deteriorated in her secret self, is another question. I have once or twice seen sudden changes of expression on her pinched lips, and heard sudden inflexions of tone in her calm voice, which have led me to suspect that her present state of suppression may have sealed up something dangerous in her nature, which used to evaporate harmlessly in the freedom of her former life. It is quite possible that I may be altogether wrong in this idea. My own impression, however, is, that I am right. Time will show.

And the magician who has wrought this wonderful transformation—the foreign husband who has tamed this once wayward English woman till her own relations hardly know her again—the Count himself? What of the Count?

This in two words: He looks like a man who could tame anything. If he had married a tigress, instead of a woman, he would have tamed the tigress. If he had married me, I should have made his cigarettes, as his wife does—I should have held my tongue when he looked at me, as she holds hers.

I am almost afraid to confess it, even to these secret pages. The man has interested me, has attracted me, has forced me to like him. In two short days he has made his way straight into my favourable estimation, and how he has worked the miracle is more than I can tell.

It absolutely startles me, now he is in my mind, to find how plainly I see him!—how much more plainly than I see Sir Percival, or Mr. Fairlie, or Walter Hartright, or any other absent person of whom I think, with the one exception of Laura herself! I can hear his voice, as if he was speaking at this moment. I know what his conversation was yesterday, as well as if I was hearing it now. How am I to describe him? There are peculiarities in his personal appearance, his habits, and his amusements, which I should blame in the boldest terms, or ridicule in the most merciless manner, if I had seen them in another man. What is it that makes me unable to blame them, or to ridicule them in HIM?

For example, he is immensely fat. Before this time I have always especially disliked corpulent humanity. I have always maintained that the popular notion of connecting excessive grossness of size and excessive good-humour as inseparable allies was equivalent to declaring, either that no people but amiable people ever get fat, or that the accidental addition of so many pounds of flesh has a directly favourable influence over the disposition of the person on whose body they accumulate. I have invariably combated both these absurd assertions by quoting examples of fat people who were as mean, vicious, and cruel as the leanest and the worst of their neighbours. I have asked whether Henry the Eighth was an amiable character? Whether Pope Alexander the Sixth was a good man? Whether Mr. Murderer and Mrs. Murderess Manning were not both unusually stout people? Whether hired nurses, proverbially as cruel a set of women as are to be found in all England, were not, for the most part, also as fat a set of women as are to be found in all England?—and so on, through dozens of other examples, modern and ancient, native and foreign, high and low. Holding these strong opinions on the subject with might and main as I do at this moment, here, nevertheless, is Count Fosco, as fat as Henry the Eighth himself, established in my favour, at one day's notice, without let or hindrance from his own odious corpulence. Marvellous indeed!

Is it his face that has recommended him?

It may be his face. He is a most remarkable likeness, on a large scale, of the great Napoleon. His features have Napoleon's magnificent regularity—his expression recalls the grandly calm, immovable power of the Great Soldier's face. This striking resemblance certainly impressed me, to begin with; but there is something in him besides the resemblance, which has impressed me more. I think the influence I am now trying to find is in his eyes. They are the most unfathomable grey eyes I ever saw, and they have at times a cold, clear, beautiful, irresistible glitter in them which forces me to look at him, and yet causes me sensations, when I do look, which I would rather not feel. Other parts of his face and head have their strange peculiarities. His complexion, for instance, has a singular sallow-fairness, so much at variance with the dark-brown colour of his hair, that I suspect the hair of being a wig, and his face, closely shaven all over, is smoother and freer from all marks and wrinkles than mine, though (according to Sir Percival's account of him) he is close on sixty years of age. But these are not the prominent personal characteristics which distinguish him, to my mind, from all the other men I have ever seen. The marked peculiarity which singles him out from the rank and file of humanity lies entirely, so far as I can tell at present, in the extraordinary expression and extraordinary power of his eyes.

His manner and his command of our language may also have assisted him, in some degree, to establish himself in my good opinion. He has that quiet deference, that look of pleased, attentive interest in listening to a woman, and that secret gentleness in his voice in speaking to a woman, which, say what we may, we can none of us resist. Here, too, his unusual command of the English language necessarily helps him. I had often heard of the extraordinary aptitude which many Italians show in mastering our strong, hard, Northern speech; but, until I saw Count Fosco, I had never supposed it possible that any foreigner could have spoken English as he speaks it. There are times when it is almost impossible to detect, by his accent that he is not a countryman of our own, and as for fluency, there are very few born Englishmen who can talk with as few stoppages and repetitions as the Count. He may construct his sentences more or less in the foreign way, but I have never yet heard him use a wrong expression, or hesitate for a moment in his choice of a word.

All the smallest characteristics of this strange man have something strikingly original and perplexingly contradictory in them. Fat as he is and old as he is, his movements are astonishingly light and easy. He is as noiseless in a room as any of us women, and more than that, with all his look of unmistakable mental firmness and power, he is as nervously sensitive as the weakest of us. He starts at chance noises as inveterately as Laura herself. He winced and shuddered yesterday, when Sir Percival beat one of the spaniels, so that I felt ashamed of my own want of tenderness and sensibility by comparison with the Count.

The relation of this last incident reminds me of one of his most curious peculiarities, which I have not yet mentioned—his extraordinary fondness for pet animals.

Some of these he has left on the Continent, but he has brought with him to this house a cockatoo, two canary-birds, and a whole family of white mice. He attends to all the necessities of these strange favourites himself, and he has taught the creatures to be surprisingly fond of him and familiar with him. The cockatoo, a most vicious and treacherous bird towards every one else, absolutely seems to love him. When he lets it out of its cage, it hops on to his knee, and claws its way up his great big body, and rubs its top-knot against his sallow double chin in the most caressing manner imaginable. He has only to set the doors of the canaries' cages open, and to call them, and the pretty little cleverly trained creatures perch fearlessly on his hand, mount his fat outstretched fingers one by one, when he tells them to "go upstairs," and sing together as if

they would burst their throats with delight when they get to the top finger. His white mice live in a little pagoda of gaily-painted wirework, designed and made by himself. They are almost as tame as the canaries, and they are perpetually let out like the canaries. They crawl all over him, popping in and out of his waistcoat, and sitting in couples, white as snow, on his capacious shoulders. He seems to be even fonder of his mice than of his other pets, smiles at them, and kisses them, and calls them by all sorts of endearing names. If it be possible to suppose an Englishman with any taste for such childish interests and amusements as these, that Englishman would certainly feel rather ashamed of them, and would be anxious to apologise for them, in the company of grown-up people. But the Count, apparently, sees nothing ridiculous in the amazing contrast between his colossal self and his frail little pets. He would blandly kiss his white mice and twitter to his canary-birds amid an assembly of English fox-hunters, and would only pity them as barbarians when they were all laughing their loudest at him.

It seems hardly credible while I am writing it down, but it is certainly true, that this same man, who has all the fondness of an old maid for his cockatoo, and all the small dexterities of an organ-boy in managing his white mice, can talk, when anything happens to rouse him, with a daring independence of thought, a knowledge of books in every language, and an experience of society in half the capitals of Europe, which would make him the prominent personage of any assembly in the civilised world. This trainer of canary-birds, this architect of a pagoda for white mice, is (as Sir Percival himself has told me) one of the first experimental chemists living, and has discovered, among other wonderful inventions, a means of petrifying the body after death, so as to preserve it, as hard as marble, to the end of time. This fat, indolent, elderly man, whose nerves are so finely strung that he starts at chance noises, and winces when he sees a house-spaniel get a whipping, went into the stable-yard on the morning after his arrival, and put his hand on the head of a chained bloodhound—a beast so savage that the very groom who feeds him keeps out of his reach. His wife and I were present, and I shall not forget the scene that followed, short as it was.

“Mind that dog, sir,” said the groom; “he flies at everybody!” “He does that, my friend,” replied the Count quietly, “because everybody is afraid of him. Let us see if he flies at me.” And he laid his plump, yellow-white fingers, on which the canary-birds had been perching ten minutes before, upon the formidable brute’s head, and looked him straight in the eyes. “You big dogs are all cowards,” he said, addressing the animal contemptuously, with his face and the dog’s within an inch of each other. “You would kill a poor cat, you infernal coward. You would fly at a starving beggar, you infernal coward. Anything that you can surprise unawares—anything that is afraid of your big body, and your wicked white teeth, and your slobbering, bloodthirsty mouth, is the thing you like to fly at. You could throttle me at this moment, you mean, miserable bully, and you daren’t so much as look me in the face, because I’m not afraid of you. Will you think better of it, and try your teeth in my fat neck? Bah! not you!” He turned away, laughing at the astonishment of the men in the yard, and the dog crept back meekly to his kennel. “Ah! my nice waistcoat!” he said pathetically. “I am sorry I came here. Some of that brute’s slobber has got on my pretty clean waistcoat.” Those words express another of his incomprehensible oddities. He is as fond of fine clothes as the veriest fool in existence, and has appeared in four magnificent waistcoats already—all of light garish colours, and all immensely large even for him—in the two days of his residence at Blackwater Park.

His tact and cleverness in small things are quite as noticeable as the singular inconsistencies in his character, and the childish triviality of his ordinary tastes and pursuits.

I can see already that he means to live on excellent terms with all of us during the period of his sojourn in this place. He has evidently discovered that Laura secretly dislikes him (she confessed as much to me when I pressed her on the subject)—but he has also found out that she is extravagantly fond of flowers. Whenever she wants a nosegay he has got one to give her, gathered and arranged by himself, and greatly to my amusement, he is always cunningly provided with a duplicate, composed of exactly the same flowers, grouped in exactly the same way, to appease his icily jealous wife before she can so much as think herself aggrieved. His management of the Countess (in public) is a sight to see. He bows to her, he habitually addresses her as “my angel,” he carries his canaries to pay her little visits on his fingers and to sing to her, he kisses her hand when she gives him his cigarettes; he presents her with sugar-plums in return, which he puts into her mouth playfully, from a box in his pocket. The rod of iron with which he rules her never appears in company—it is a private rod, and is always kept upstairs.

His method of recommending himself to me is entirely different. He flatters my vanity by talking to me as seriously and sensibly as if I was a man. Yes! I can find him out when I am away from him—I know he flatters my vanity, when I think of him up here in my own room—and yet, when I go downstairs, and get into his company again, he will blind me again, and I shall be flattered again, just as if I had never found him out at all! He can manage me as he manages his wife and Laura, as he managed the bloodhound in the stable-yard, as he manages Sir Percival himself, every hour in the day. “My good Percival! how I like your rough English humour!”—“My good Percival! how I enjoy your solid English sense!” He puts the rudest remarks Sir Percival can make on his effeminate tastes and amusements quietly away from him in that manner—always calling the baronet by his Christian name, smiling at him with the calmest superiority, patting him on the shoulder, and bearing with him benignantly, as a good-humoured father bears with a wayward son.

The interest which I really cannot help feeling in this strangely original man has led me to question Sir Percival about his past life.

Sir Percival either knows little, or will tell me little, about it. He and the Count first met many years ago, at Rome, under the dangerous circumstances to which I have alluded elsewhere. Since that time they have been perpetually together in London, in Paris, and in Vienna—but never in Italy again; the Count having, oddly enough, not crossed the frontiers of his native country for years past. Perhaps he has been made the victim of some political persecution? At all events, he seems to be patriotically anxious not to lose sight of any of his own countrymen who may happen to be in England. On the evening of his arrival he asked how far we were from the nearest town, and whether we knew of any Italian gentlemen who might happen to be settled there. He is certainly in correspondence with people on the Continent, for his letters have all sorts of odd stamps on them, and I saw one for him this morning, waiting in his place at the breakfast-table, with a huge, official-looking seal on it. Perhaps he is in correspondence with his government? And yet, that is hardly to be reconciled either with my other idea that he may be a political exile.

How much I seem to have written about Count Fosco! And what does it all amount to?—as poor, dear Mr. Gilmore would ask, in his impenetrable business-like way I can only repeat that I do assuredly feel, even on this short acquaintance, a strange, half-willing, half-unwilling liking for the Count. He seems to have established over me the same sort of ascendancy which he has evidently gained over Sir Percival. Free, and even rude, as he may occasionally be in his manner towards his fat friend, Sir Percival is nevertheless afraid, as I can plainly see, of giving any serious offence to the Count. I wonder whether I am afraid too? I certainly never saw a man, in

all my experience, whom I should be so sorry to have for an enemy. Is this because I like him, or because I am afraid of him? Chi sa?—as Count Fosco might say in his own language. Who knows?

June 16th.—Something to chronicle to-day besides my own ideas and impressions. A visitor has arrived—quite unknown to Laura and to me, and apparently quite unexpected by Sir Percival.

We were all at lunch, in the room with the new French windows that open into the verandah, and the Count (who devours pastry as I have never yet seen it devoured by any human beings but girls at boarding-schools) had just amused us by asking gravely for his fourth tart—when the servant entered to announce the visitor.

“Mr. Merriman has just come, Sir Percival, and wishes to see you immediately.”

Sir Percival started, and looked at the man with an expression of angry alarm.

“Mr. Merriman!” he repeated, as if he thought his own ears must have deceived him.

“Yes, Sir Percival—Mr. Merriman, from London.” “Where is he?”

“In the library, Sir Percival.”

He left the table the instant the last answer was given, and hurried out of the room without saying a word to any of us.

“Who is Mr. Merriman?” asked Laura, appealing to me.

“I have not the least idea,” was all I could say in reply.

The Count had finished his fourth tart, and had gone to a side-table to look after his vicious cockatoo. He turned round to us with the bird perched on his shoulder.

“Mr. Merriman is Sir Percival’s solicitor,” he said quietly.

Sir Percival’s solicitor. It was a perfectly straightforward answer to Laura’s question, and yet, under the circumstances, it was not satisfactory. If Mr. Merriman had been specially sent for by his client, there would have been nothing very wonderful in his leaving town to obey the summons. But when a lawyer travels from London to Hampshire without being sent for, and when his arrival at a gentleman’s house seriously startles the gentleman himself, it may be safely taken for granted that the legal visitor is the bearer of some very important and very unexpected news—news which may be either very good or very bad, but which cannot, in either case, be of the common everyday kind.

Laura and I sat silent at the table for a quarter of an hour or more, wondering uneasily what had happened, and waiting for the chance of Sir Percival’s speedy return. There were no signs of his return, and we rose to leave the room.

The Count, attentive as usual, advanced from the corner in which he had been feeding his cockatoo, with the bird still perched on his shoulder, and opened the door for us. Laura and Madame Fosco went out first. Just as I was on the point of following them he made a sign with his hand, and spoke to me, before I passed him, in the oddest manner.

“Yes,” he said, quietly answering the unexpressed idea at that moment in my mind, as if I had plainly confided it to him in so many words—“yes, Miss Halcombe, something HAS happened.”

I was on the point of answering, “I never said so,” but the vicious cockatoo ruffled his clipped wings and gave a screech that set all my nerves on edge in an instant, and made me only too glad to get out of the room.

I joined Laura at the foot of the stairs. The thought in her mind was the same as the thought in mine, which Count Fosco had surprised, and when she spoke her words were almost the echo of his. She, too, said to me secretly that she was afraid something had happened.

### III

June 16th.—I have a few lines more to add to this day's entry before I go to bed to-night.

About two hours after Sir Percival rose from the luncheon-table to receive his solicitor, Mr. Merriman, in the library, I left my room alone to take a walk in the plantations. Just as I was at the end of the landing the library door opened and the two gentlemen came out. Thinking it best not to disturb them by appearing on the stairs, I resolved to defer going down till they had crossed the hall. Although they spoke to each other in guarded tones, their words were pronounced with sufficient distinctness of utterance to reach my ears.

"Make your mind easy, Sir Percival," I heard the lawyer say; "it all rests with Lady Glyde."

I had turned to go back to my own room for a minute or two, but the sound of Laura's name on the lips of a stranger stopped me instantly. I daresay it was very wrong and very discreditable to listen, but where is the woman, in the whole range of our sex, who can regulate her actions by the abstract principles of honour, when those principles point one way, and when her affections, and the interests which grow out of them, point the other?

I listened—and under similar circumstances I would listen again— yes! with my ear at the keyhole, if I could not possibly manage it in any other way.

"You quite understand, Sir Percival," the lawyer went on. "Lady Glyde is to sign her name in the presence of a witness—or of two witnesses, if you wish to be particularly careful—and is then to put her finger on the seal and say, 'I deliver this as my act and deed.' If that is done in a week's time the arrangement will be perfectly successful, and the anxiety will be all over. If not——"

"What do you mean by 'if not'?" asked Sir Percival angrily. "If the thing must be done it SHALL be done. I promise you that, Merriman."

"Just so, Sir Percival—just so; but there are two alternatives in all transactions, and we lawyers like to look both of them in the face boldly. If through any extraordinary circumstance the arrangement should not be made, I think I may be able to get the parties to accept bills at three months. But how the money is to be raised when the bills fall due——"

"Damn the bills! The money is only to be got in one way, and in that way, I tell you again, it SHALL be got. Take a glass of wine, Merriman, before you go."

"Much obliged, Sir Percival, I have not a moment to lose if I am to catch the up-train. You will let me know as soon as the arrangement is complete? and you will not forget the caution I recommended——"

"Of course I won't. There's the dog-cart at the door for you. My groom will get you to the station in no time. Benjamin, drive like mad! Jump in. If Mr. Merriman misses the train you lose your place. Hold fast, Merriman, and if you are upset trust to the devil to save his own." With that parting benediction the baronet turned about and walked back to the library.

I had not heard much, but the little that had reached my ears was enough to make me feel uneasy. The "something" that "had happened" was but too plainly a serious money embarrassment, and Sir Percival's relief from it depended upon Laura. The prospect of seeing her involved in her husband's secret difficulties filled me with dismay, exaggerated, no doubt, by my ignorance of business and my settled distrust of Sir Percival. Instead of going out, as I proposed, I went back immediately to Laura's room to tell her what I had heard.

She received my bad news so composedly as to surprise me. She evidently knows more of her husband's character and her husband's embarrassments than I have suspected up to this time.

"I feared as much," she said, "when I heard of that strange gentleman who called, and declined to leave his name."

"Who do you think the gentleman was, then?" I asked.

"Some person who has heavy claims on Sir Percival," she answered, "and who has been the cause of Mr. Merriman's visit here to-day."

"Do you know anything about those claims?"

"No, I know no particulars."

"You will sign nothing, Laura, without first looking at it?"

"Certainly not, Marian. Whatever I can harmlessly and honestly do to help him I will do—for the sake of making your life and mine, love, as easy and as happy as possible. But I will do nothing ignorantly, which we might, one day, have reason to feel ashamed of. Let us say no more about it now. You have got your hat on—suppose we go and dream away the afternoon in the grounds?"

On leaving the house we directed our steps to the nearest shade.

As we passed an open space among the trees in front of the house, there was Count Fosco, slowly walking backwards and forwards on the grass, sunning himself in the full blaze of the hot June afternoon. He had a broad straw hat on, with a violet-coloured ribbon round it. A blue blouse, with profuse white fancy-work over the bosom, covered his prodigious body, and was girt about the place where his waist might once have been with a broad scarlet leather belt. Nankeen trousers, displaying more white fancy-work over the ankles, and purple morocco slippers, adorned his lower extremities. He was singing Figaro's famous song in the Barber of Seville, with that crisply fluent vocalisation which is never heard from any other than an Italian throat, accompanying himself on the concertina, which he played with ecstatic throwings-up of his arms, and graceful twistings and turnings of his head, like a fat St. Cecilia masquerading in male attire. "Figaro qua! Figaro la! Figaro su! Figaro giu!" sang the Count, jauntily tossing up the concertina at arm's length, and bowing to us, on one side of the instrument, with the airy grace and elegance of Figaro himself at twenty years of age.

"Take my word for it, Laura, that man knows something of Sir Percival's embarrassments," I said, as we returned the Count's salutation from a safe distance.

"What makes you think that?" she asked.

"How should he have known, otherwise, that Mr. Merriman was Sir Percival's solicitor?" I rejoined. "Besides, when I followed you out of the luncheon-room, he told me, without a single word of inquiry on my part, that something had happened. Depend upon it, he knows more than we do."

"Don't ask him any questions if he does. Don't take him into our confidence!"

"You seem to dislike him, Laura, in a very determined manner. What has he said or done to justify you?"

"Nothing, Marian. On the contrary, he was all kindness and attention on our journey home, and he several times checked Sir Percival's outbreaks of temper, in the most considerate manner towards me. Perhaps I dislike him because he has so much more power over my husband than I have. Perhaps it hurts my pride to be under any obligations to his interference. All I know is, that I DO dislike him."

The rest of the day and evening passed quietly enough. The Count and I played at chess. For the first two games he politely allowed me to conquer him, and then, when he saw that I had

found him out, begged my pardon, and at the third game checkmated me in ten minutes. Sir Percival never once referred, all through the evening, to the lawyer's visit. But either that event, or something else, had produced a singular alteration for the better in him. He was as polite and agreeable to all of us, as he used to be in the days of his probation at Limmeridge, and he was so amazingly attentive and kind to his wife, that even icy Madame Fosco was roused into looking at him with a grave surprise. What does this mean? I think I can guess—I am afraid Laura can guess—and I am sure Count Fosco knows. I caught Sir Percival looking at him for approval more than once in the course of the evening.

June 17th.—A day of events. I most fervently hope I may not have to add, a day of disasters as well.

Sir Percival was as silent at breakfast as he had been the evening before, on the subject of the mysterious "arrangement" (as the lawyer called it) which is hanging over our heads. An hour afterwards, however, he suddenly entered the morning-room, where his wife and I were waiting, with our hats on, for Madame Fosco to join us, and inquired for the Count.

"We expect to see him here directly," I said.

"The fact is," Sir Percival went on, walking nervously about the room, "I want Fosco and his wife in the library, for a mere business formality, and I want you there, Laura, for a minute too." He stopped, and appeared to notice, for the first time, that we were in our walking costume. "Have you just come in?" he asked, "or were you just going out?"

"We were all thinking of going to the lake this morning," said Laura. "But if you have any other arrangement to propose——"

"No, no," he answered hastily. "My arrangement can wait. After lunch will do as well for it as after breakfast. All going to the lake, eh? A good idea. Let's have an idle morning—I'll be one of the party."

There was no mistaking his manner, even if it had been possible to mistake the uncharacteristic readiness which his words expressed, to submit his own plans and projects to the convenience of others. He was evidently relieved at finding any excuse for delaying the business formality in the library, to which his own words had referred. My heart sank within me as I drew the inevitable inference.

The Count and his wife joined us at that moment. The lady had her husband's embroidered tobacco-pouch, and her store of paper in her hand, for the manufacture of the eternal cigarettes. The gentleman, dressed, as usual, in his blouse and straw hat, carried the gay little pagoda-cage, with his darling white mice in it, and smiled on them, and on us, with a bland amiability which it was impossible to resist.

"With your kind permission," said the Count, "I will take my small family here—my poor-little-harmless-pretty-Mouseys, out for an airing along with us. There are dogs about the house, and shall I leave my forlorn white children at the mercies of the dogs? Ah, never!"

He chirruped paternally at his small white children through the bars of the pagoda, and we all left the house for the lake.

In the plantation Sir Percival strayed away from us. It seems to be part of his restless disposition always to separate himself from his companions on these occasions, and always to occupy himself when he is alone in cutting new walking-sticks for his own use. The mere act of cutting and lopping at hazard appears to please him. He has filled the house with walking-sticks of his own making, not one of which he ever takes up for a second time. When they have been

once used his interest in them is all exhausted, and he thinks of nothing but going on and making more.

At the old boat-house he joined us again. I will put down the conversation that ensued when we were all settled in our places exactly as it passed. It is an important conversation, so far as I am concerned, for it has seriously disposed me to distrust the influence which Count Fosco has exercised over my thoughts and feelings, and to resist it for the future as resolutely as I can.

The boat-house was large enough to hold us all, but Sir Percival remained outside trimming the last new stick with his pocket-axe. We three women found plenty of room on the large seat. Laura took her work, and Madame Fosco began her cigarettes. I, as usual, had nothing to do. My hands always were, and always will be, as awkward as a man's. The Count good-humouredly took a stool many sizes too small for him, and balanced himself on it with his back against the side of the shed, which creaked and groaned under his weight. He put the pagoda-cage on his lap, and let out the mice to crawl over him as usual. They are pretty, innocent-looking little creatures, but the sight of them creeping about a man's body is for some reason not pleasant to me. It excites a strange responsive creeping in my own nerves, and suggests hideous ideas of men dying in prison with the crawling creatures of the dungeon preying on them undisturbed.

The morning was windy and cloudy, and the rapid alternations of shadow and sunlight over the waste of the lake made the view look doubly wild, weird, and gloomy.

"Some people call that picturesque," said Sir Percival, pointing over the wide prospect with his half-finished walking-stick. "I call it a blot on a gentleman's property. In my great-grandfather's time the lake flowed to this place. Look at it now! It is not four feet deep anywhere, and it is all puddles and pools. I wish I could afford to drain it, and plant it all over. My bailiff (a superstitious idiot) says he is quite sure the lake has a curse on it, like the Dead Sea. What do you think, Fosco? It looks just the place for a murder, doesn't it?"

"My good Percival," remonstrated the Count. "What is your solid English sense thinking of? The water is too shallow to hide the body, and there is sand everywhere to print off the murderer's footsteps. It is, upon the whole, the very worst place for a murder that I ever set my eyes on."

"Humbug!" said Sir Percival, cutting away fiercely at his stick. "You know what I mean. The dreary scenery, the lonely situation. If you choose to understand me, you can—if you don't choose, I am not going to trouble myself to explain my meaning."

"And why not," asked the Count, "when your meaning can be explained by anybody in two words? If a fool was going to commit a murder, your lake is the first place he would choose for it. If a wise man was going to commit a murder, your lake is the last place he would choose for it. Is that your meaning? If it is, there is your explanation for you ready made. Take it, Percival, with your good Fosco's blessing."

Laura looked at the Count with her dislike for him appearing a little too plainly in her face. He was so busy with his mice that he did not notice her.

"I am sorry to hear the lake-view connected with anything so horrible as the idea of murder," she said. "And if Count Fosco must divide murderers into classes, I think he has been very unfortunate in his choice of expressions. To describe them as fools only seems like treating them with an indulgence to which they have no claim. And to describe them as wise men sounds to me like a downright contradiction in terms. I have always heard that truly wise men are truly good men, and have a horror of crime."

"My dear lady," said the Count, "those are admirable sentiments, and I have seen them stated at the tops of copy-books." He lifted one of the white mice in the palm of his hand, and spoke to

it in his whimsical way. “My pretty little smooth white rascal,” he said, “here is a moral lesson for you. A truly wise mouse is a truly good mouse. Mention that, if you please, to your companions, and never gnaw at the bars of your cage again as long as you live.”

“It is easy to turn everything into ridicule,” said Laura resolutely; “but you will not find it quite so easy, Count Fosco, to give me an instance of a wise man who has been a great criminal.”

The Count shrugged his huge shoulders, and smiled on Laura in the friendliest manner.

“Most true!” he said. “The fool’s crime is the crime that is found out, and the wise man’s crime is the crime that is NOT found out. If I could give you an instance, it would not be the instance of a wise man. Dear Lady Glyde, your sound English common sense has been too much for me. It is checkmate for me this time, Miss Halcombe—ha?”

“Stand to your guns, Laura,” sneered Sir Percival, who had been listening in his place at the door. “Tell him next, that crimes cause their own detection. There’s another bit of copy-book morality for you, Fosco. Crimes cause their own detection. What infernal humbug!”

“I believe it to be true,” said Laura quietly.

Sir Percival burst out laughing, so violently, so outrageously, that he quite startled us all—the Count more than any of us.

“I believe it too,” I said, coming to Laura’s rescue.

Sir Percival, who had been unaccountably amused at his wife’s remark, was just as unaccountably irritated by mine. He struck the new stick savagely on the sand, and walked away from us.

“Poor dear Percival!” cried Count Fosco, looking after him gaily, “he is the victim of English spleen. But, my dear Miss Halcombe, my dear Lady Glyde, do you really believe that crimes cause their own detection? And you, my angel,” he continued, turning to his wife, who had not uttered a word yet, “do you think so too?”

“I wait to be instructed,” replied the Countess, in tones of freezing reproof, intended for Laura and me, “before I venture on giving my opinion in the presence of well-informed men.”

“Do you, indeed?” I said. “I remember the time, Countess, when you advocated the Rights of Women, and freedom of female opinion was one of them.”

“What is your view of the subject, Count?” asked Madame Fosco, calmly proceeding with her cigarettes, and not taking the least notice of me.

The Count stroked one of his white mice reflectively with his chubby little finger before he answered.

“It is truly wonderful,” he said, “how easily Society can console itself for the worst of its shortcomings with a little bit of clap-trap. The machinery it has set up for the detection of crime is miserably ineffective—and yet only invent a moral epigram, saying that it works well, and you blind everybody to its blunders from that moment. Crimes cause their own detection, do they? And murder will out (another moral epigram), will it? Ask Coroners who sit at inquests in large towns if that is true, Lady Glyde. Ask secretaries of life-assurance companies if that is true, Miss Halcombe. Read your own public journals. In the few cases that get into the newspapers, are there not instances of slain bodies found, and no murderers ever discovered? Multiply the cases that are reported by the cases that are NOT reported, and the bodies that are found by the bodies that are NOT found, and what conclusion do you come to? This. That there are foolish criminals who are discovered, and wise criminals who escape. The hiding of a crime, or the detection of a crime, what is it? A trial of skill between the police on one side, and the individual on the other. When the criminal is a brutal, ignorant fool, the police in nine cases out of ten win. When the criminal is a resolute, educated, highly-intelligent man, the police in nine cases out of ten lose. If

the police win, you generally hear all about it. If the police lose, you generally hear nothing. And on this tottering foundation you build up your comfortable moral maxim that Crime causes its own detection! Yes—all the crime you know of. And what of the rest?”

“Devilish true, and very well put,” cried a voice at the entrance of the boat-house. Sir Percival had recovered his equanimity, and had come back while we were listening to the Count.

“Some of it may be true,” I said, “and all of it may be very well put. But I don’t see why Count Fosco should celebrate the victory of the criminal over Society with so much exultation, or why you, Sir Percival, should applaud him so loudly for doing it.”

“Do you hear that, Fosco?” asked Sir Percival. “Take my advice, and make your peace with your audience. Tell them virtue’s a fine thing—they like that, I can promise you.”

The Count laughed inwardly and silently, and two of the white mice in his waistcoat, alarmed by the internal convulsion going on beneath them, darted out in a violent hurry, and scrambled into their cage again.

“The ladies, my good Percival, shall tell me about virtue,” he said. “They are better authorities than I am, for they know what virtue is, and I don’t.”

“You hear him?” said Sir Percival. “Isn’t it awful?”

“It is true,” said the Count quietly. “I am a citizen of the world, and I have met, in my time, with so many different sorts of virtue, that I am puzzled, in my old age, to say which is the right sort and which is the wrong. Here, in England, there is one virtue. And there, in China, there is another virtue. And John Englishman says my virtue is the genuine virtue. And John Chinaman says my virtue is the genuine virtue. And I say Yes to one, or No to the other, and am just as much bewildered about it in the case of John with the top-boots as I am in the case of John with the pigtail. Ah, nice little Mousey! come, kiss me. What is your own private notion of a virtuous man, my pret-pret-pretty? A man who keeps you warm, and gives you plenty to eat. And a good notion, too, for it is intelligible, at the least.”

“Stay a minute, Count,” I interposed. “Accepting your illustration, surely we have one unquestionable virtue in England which is wanting in China. The Chinese authorities kill thousands of innocent people on the most frivolous pretexts. We in England are free from all guilt of that kind—we commit no such dreadful crime—we abhor reckless bloodshed with all our hearts.”

“Quite right, Marian,” said Laura. “Well thought of, and well expressed “

“Pray allow the Count to proceed,” said Madame Fosco, with stern civility. “You will find, young ladies, that HE never speaks without having excellent reasons for all that he says.”

“Thank you, my angel,” replied the Count. “Have a bon-bon?” He took out of his pocket a pretty little inlaid box, and placed it open on the table. “Chocolat a la Vanille,” cried the impenetrable man, cheerfully rattling the sweetmeats in the box, and bowing all round. “Offered by Fosco as an act of homage to the charming society.”

“Be good enough to go on, Count,” said his wife, with a spiteful reference to myself. “Oblige me by answering Miss Halcombe.”

“Miss Halcombe is unanswerable,” replied the polite Italian; “that is to say, so far as she goes. Yes! I agree with her. John Bull does abhor the crimes of John Chinaman. He is the quickest old gentleman at finding out faults that are his neighbours’, and the slowest old gentleman at finding out the faults that are his own, who exists on the face of creation. Is he so very much better in this way than the people whom he condemns in their way? English Society, Miss Halcombe, is as often the accomplice as it is the enemy of crime. Yes! yes! Crime is in this country what crime is in other countries—a good friend to a man and to those about him as often as it is an enemy. A

great rascal provides for his wife and family. The worse he is the more he makes them the objects for your sympathy. He often provides also for himself. A profligate spendthrift who is always borrowing money will get more from his friends than the rigidly honest man who only borrows of them once, under pressure of the direst want. In the one case the friends will not be at all surprised, and they will give. In the other case they will be very much surprised, and they will hesitate. Is the prison that Mr. Scoundrel lives in at the end of his career a more uncomfortable place than the workhouse that Mr. Honesty lives in at the end of his career? When John-Howard-Philanthropist wants to relieve misery he goes to find it in prisons, where crime is wretched—not in huts and hovels, where virtue is wretched too. Who is the English poet who has won the most universal sympathy—who makes the easiest of all subjects for pathetic writing and pathetic painting? That nice young person who began life with a forgery, and ended it by a suicide—your dear, romantic, interesting Chatterton. Which gets on best, do you think, of two poor starving dressmakers—the woman who resists temptation and is honest, or the woman who falls under temptation and steals? You all know that the stealing is the making of that second woman's fortune—it advertises her from length to breadth of good-humoured, charitable England—and she is relieved, as the breaker of a commandment, when she would have been left to starve, as the keeper of it. Come here, my jolly little Mouse! Hey! presto! pass! I transform you, for the time being, into a respectable lady. Stop there, in the palm of my great big hand, my dear, and listen. You marry the poor man whom you love, Mouse, and one half your friends pity, and the other half blame you. And now, on the contrary, you sell yourself for gold to a man you don't care for, and all your friends rejoice over you, and a minister of public worship sanctions the base horror of the vilest of all human bargains, and smiles and smirks afterwards at your table, if you are polite enough to ask him to breakfast. Hey! presto! pass! Be a mouse again, and squeak. If you continue to be a lady much longer, I shall have you telling me that Society abhors crime—and then, Mouse, I shall doubt if your own eyes and ears are really of any use to you. Ah! I am a bad man, Lady Glyde, am I not? I say what other people only think, and when all the rest of the world is in a conspiracy to accept the mask for the true face, mine is the rash hand that tears off the plump pasteboard, and shows the bare bones beneath. I will get up on my big elephant's legs, before I do myself any more harm in your amiable estimations—I will get up and take a little airy walk of my own. Dear ladies, as your excellent Sheridan said, I go—and leave my character behind me.”

He got up, put the cage on the table, and paused for a moment to count the mice in it. “One, two, three, four—Ha!” he cried, with a look of horror, “where, in the name of Heaven, is the fifth—the youngest, the whitest, the most amiable of all—my Benjamin of mice!”

Neither Laura nor I were in any favorable disposition to be amused. The Count's glib cynicism had revealed a new aspect of his nature from which we both recoiled. But it was impossible to resist the comical distress of so very large a man at the loss of so very small a mouse. We laughed in spite of ourselves; and when Madame Fosco rose to set the example of leaving the boat-house empty, so that her husband might search it to its remotest corners, we rose also to follow her out.

Before we had taken three steps, the Count's quick eye discovered the lost mouse under the seat that we had been occupying. He pulled aside the bench, took the little animal up in his hand, and then suddenly stopped, on his knees, looking intently at a particular place on the ground just beneath him.

When he rose to his feet again, his hand shook so that he could hardly put the mouse back in the cage, and his face was of a faint livid yellow hue all over.

“Percival!” he said, in a whisper. “Percival! come here.”

Sir Percival had paid no attention to any of us for the last ten minutes. He had been entirely absorbed in writing figures on the sand, and then rubbing them out again with the point of his stick.

“What’s the matter now?” he asked, lounging carelessly into the boat-house.

“Do you see nothing there?” said the Count, catching him nervously by the collar with one hand, and pointing with the other to the place near which he had found the mouse.

“I see plenty of dry sand,” answered Sir Percival, “and a spot of dirt in the middle of it.”

“Not dirt,” whispered the Count, fastening the other hand suddenly on Sir Percival’s collar, and shaking it in his agitation. “Blood.”

Laura was near enough to hear the last word, softly as he whispered it. She turned to me with a look of terror.

“Nonsense, my dear,” I said. “There is no need to be alarmed. It is only the blood of a poor little stray dog.”

Everybody was astonished, and everybody’s eyes were fixed on me inquiringly.

“How do you know that?” asked Sir Percival, speaking first.

“I found the dog here, dying, on the day when you all returned from abroad,” I replied. “The poor creature had strayed into the plantation, and had been shot by your keeper.”

“Whose dog was it?” inquired Sir Percival. “Not one of mine?”

“Did you try to save the poor thing?” asked Laura earnestly. “Surely you tried to save it, Marian?”

“Yes,” I said, “the housekeeper and I both did our best—but the dog was mortally wounded, and he died under our hands.”

“Whose dog was it?” persisted Sir Percival, repeating his question a little irritably. “One of mine?”

“No, not one of yours.”

“Whose then? Did the housekeeper know?”

The housekeeper’s report of Mrs. Catherick’s desire to conceal her visit to Blackwater Park from Sir Percival’s knowledge recurred to my memory the moment he put that last question, and I half doubted the discretion of answering it; but in my anxiety to quiet the general alarm, I had thoughtlessly advanced too far to draw back, except at the risk of exciting suspicion, which might only make matters worse. There was nothing for it but to answer at once, without reference to results.

“Yes,” I said. “The housekeeper knew. She told me it was Mrs. Catherick’s dog.”

Sir Percival had hitherto remained at the inner end of the boat-house with Count Fosco, while I spoke to him from the door. But the instant Mrs. Catherick’s name passed my lips he pushed by the Count roughly, and placed himself face to face with me under the open daylight.

“How came the housekeeper to know it was Mrs. Catherick’s dog?” he asked, fixing his eyes on mine with a frowning interest and attention, which half angered, half startled me.

“She knew it,” I said quietly, “because Mrs. Catherick brought the dog with her.”

“Brought it with her? Where did she bring it with her?”

“To this house.”

“What the devil did Mrs. Catherick want at this house?”

The manner in which he put the question was even more offensive than the language in which he expressed it. I marked my sense of his want of common politeness by silently turning away from him.

Just as I moved the Count's persuasive hand was laid on his shoulder, and the Count's mellifluous voice interposed to quiet him.

"My dear Percival!—gently—gently!"

Sir Percival looked round in his angriest manner. The Count only smiled and repeated the soothing application.

"Gently, my good friend—gently!"

Sir Percival hesitated, followed me a few steps, and, to my great surprise, offered me an apology.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Halcombe," he said. "I have been out of order lately, and I am afraid I am a little irritable. But I should like to know what Mrs. Catherick could possibly want here. When did she come? Was the housekeeper the only person who saw her?"

"The only person," I answered, "so far as I know."

The Count interposed again.

"In that case why not question the housekeeper?" he said. "Why not go, Percival, to the fountain-head of information at once?"

"Quite right!" said Sir Percival. "Of course the housekeeper is the first person to question. Excessively stupid of me not to see it myself." With those words he instantly left us to return to the house.

The motive of the Count's interference, which had puzzled me at first, betrayed itself when Sir Percival's back was turned. He had a host of questions to put to me about Mrs. Catherick, and the cause of her visit to Blackwater Park, which he could scarcely have asked in his friend's presence. I made my answers as short as I civilly could, for I had already determined to check the least approach to any exchanging of confidences between Count Fosco and myself. Laura, however, unconsciously helped him to extract all my information, by making inquiries herself, which left me no alternative but to reply to her, or to appear in the very unenviable and very false character of a depository of Sir Percival's secrets. The end of it was, that, in about ten minutes' time, the Count knew as much as I know of Mrs. Catherick, and of the events which have so strangely connected us with her daughter, Anne, from the time when Cartright met with her to this day.

The effect of my information on him was, in one respect, curious enough.

Intimately as he knows Sir Percival, and closely as he appears to be associated with Sir Percival's private affairs in general, he is certainly as far as I am from knowing anything of the true story of Anne Catherick. The unsolved mystery in connection with this unhappy woman is now rendered doubly suspicious, in my eyes, by the absolute conviction which I feel, that the clue to it has been hidden by Sir Percival from the most intimate friend he has in the world. It was impossible to mistake the eager curiosity of the Count's look and manner while he drank in greedily every word that fell from my lips. There are many kinds of curiosity, I know—but there is no misinterpreting the curiosity of blank surprise: if I ever saw it in my life I saw it in the Count's face.

While the questions and answers were going on, we had all been strolling quietly back through the plantation. As soon as we reached the house the first object that we saw in front of it was Sir Percival's dog-cart, with the horse put to and the groom waiting by it in his stable-jacket. If these unexpected appearances were to be trusted, the examination of the house-keeper had produced important results already.

"A fine horse, my friend," said the Count, addressing the groom with the most engaging familiarity of manner, "You are going to drive out?"

"I am not going, sir," replied the man, looking at his stable-jacket, and evidently wondering whether the foreign gentleman took it for his livery. "My master drives himself."

"Aha!" said the Count, "does he indeed? I wonder he gives himself the trouble when he has got you to drive for him. Is he going to fatigue that nice, shining, pretty horse by taking him very far to-day?"

"I don't know, sir," answered the man. "The horse is a mare, if you please, sir. She's the highest-couraged thing we've got in the stables. Her name's Brown Molly, sir, and she'll go till she drops. Sir Percival usually takes Isaac of York for the short distances."

"And your shining courageous Brown Molly for the long?"

"Logical inference, Miss Halcombe," continued the Count, wheeling round briskly, and addressing me. "Sir Percival is going a long distance to-day."

I made no reply. I had my own inferences to draw, from what I knew through the housekeeper and from what I saw before me, and I did not choose to share them with Count Fosco.

When Sir Percival was in Cumberland (I thought to myself), he walked away a long distance, on Anne's account, to question the family at Todd's Corner. Now he is in Hampshire, is he going to drive away a long distance, on Anne's account again, to question Mrs. Catherick at Welmingham?

We all entered the house. As we crossed the hall Sir Percival came out from the library to meet us. He looked hurried and pale and anxious—but for all that, he was in his most polite mood when he spoke to us.

"I am sorry to say I am obliged to leave you," he began—"a long drive—a matter that I can't very well put off. I shall be back in good time to-morrow—but before I go I should like that little business-formality, which I spoke of this morning, to be settled. Laura, will you come into the library? It won't take a minute—a mere formality. Countess, may I trouble you also? I want you and the Countess, Fosco, to be witnesses to a signature—nothing more. Come in at once and get it over."

He held the library door open until they had passed in, followed them, and shut it softly.

I remained, for a moment afterwards, standing alone in the hall, with my heart beating fast and my mind misgiving me sadly. Then I went on to the staircase, and ascended slowly to my own room.

#### IV

June 17th.—Just as my hand was on the door of my room, I heard Sir Percival's voice calling to me from below.

"I must beg you to come downstairs again," he said. "It is Fosco's fault, Miss Halcombe, not mine. He has started some nonsensical objection to his wife being one of the witnesses, and has obliged me to ask you to join us in the library."

I entered the room immediately with Sir Percival. Laura was waiting by the writing-table, twisting and turning her garden hat uneasily in her hands. Madame Fosco sat near her, in an arm-chair, imperturbably admiring her husband, who stood by himself at the other end of the library, picking off the dead leaves from the flowers in the window.

The moment I appeared the Count advanced to meet me, and to offer his explanations.

“A thousand pardons, Miss Halcombe,” he said. “You know the character which is given to my countrymen by the English? We Italians are all wily and suspicious by nature, in the estimation of the good John Bull. Set me down, if you please, as being no better than the rest of my race. I am a wily Italian and a suspicious Italian. You have thought so yourself, dear lady, have you not? Well! it is part of my wiliness and part of my suspicion to object to Madame Fosco being a witness to Lady Glyde’s signature, when I am also a witness myself.”

“There is not the shadow of a reason for his objection,” interposed Sir Percival. “I have explained to him that the law of England allows Madame Fosco to witness a signature as well as her husband.”

“I admit it,” resumed the Count. “The law of England says, Yes, but the conscience of Fosco says, No.” He spread out his fat fingers on the bosom of his blouse, and bowed solemnly, as if he wished to introduce his conscience to us all, in the character of an illustrious addition to the society. “What this document which Lady Glyde is about to sign may be,” he continued, “I neither know nor desire to know. I only say this, circumstances may happen in the future which may oblige Percival, or his representatives, to appeal to the two witnesses, in which case it is certainly desirable that those witnesses should represent two opinions which are perfectly independent the one of the other. This cannot be if my wife signs as well as myself, because we have but one opinion between us, and that opinion is mine. I will not have it cast in my teeth, at some future day, that Madame Fosco acted under my coercion, and was, in plain fact, no witness at all. I speak in Percival’s interest, when I propose that my name shall appear (as the nearest friend of the husband), and your name, Miss Halcombe (as the nearest friend of the wife). I am a Jesuit, if you please to think so—a splitter of straws—a man of trifles and crochets and scruples—but you will humour me, I hope, in merciful consideration for my suspicious Italian character, and my uneasy Italian conscience.” He bowed again, stepped back a few paces, and withdrew his conscience from our society as politely as he had introduced it.

The Count’s scruples might have been honourable and reasonable enough, but there was something in his manner of expressing them which increased my unwillingness to be concerned in the business of the signature. No consideration of less importance than my consideration for Laura would have induced me to consent to be a witness at all. One look, however, at her anxious face decided me to risk anything rather than desert her.

“I will readily remain in the room,” I said. “And if I find no reason for starting any small scruples on my side, you may rely on me as a witness.”

Sir Percival looked at me sharply, as if he was about to say something. But at the same moment, Madame Fosco attracted his attention by rising from her chair. She had caught her husband’s eye, and had evidently received her orders to leave the room.

“You needn’t go,” said Sir Percival.

Madame Fosco looked for her orders again, got them again, said she would prefer leaving us to our business, and resolutely walked out. The Count lit a cigarette, went back to the flowers in the window, and puffed little jets of smoke at the leaves, in a state of the deepest anxiety about killing the insects.

Meanwhile Sir Percival unlocked a cupboard beneath one of the book-cases, and produced from it a piece of parchment, folded longwise, many times over. He placed it on the table, opened the last fold only, and kept his hand on the rest. The last fold displayed a strip of blank parchment with little wafers stuck on it at certain places. Every line of the writing was hidden in the part which he still held folded up under his hand. Laura and I looked at each other. Her face was pale, but it showed no indecision and no fear.

Sir Percival dipped a pen in ink, and handed it to his wife. "Sign your name there," he said, pointing to the place. "You and Fosco are to sign afterwards, Miss Halcombe, opposite those two wafers. Come here, Fosco! witnessing a signature is not to be done by mooning out of window and smoking into the flowers."

The Count threw away his cigarette, and joined us at the table, with his hands carelessly thrust into the scarlet belt of his blouse, and his eyes steadily fixed on Sir Percival's face. Laura, who was on the other side of her husband, with the pen in her hand, looked at him too. He stood between them holding the folded parchment down firmly on the table, and glancing across at me, as I sat opposite to him, with such a sinister mixture of suspicion and embarrassment on his face that he looked more like a prisoner at the bar than a gentleman in his own house.

"Sign there," he repeated, turning suddenly on Laura, and pointing once more to the place on the parchment.

"What is it I am to sign?" she asked quietly.

"I have no time to explain," he answered. "The dog-cart is at the door, and I must go directly. Besides, if I had time, you wouldn't understand. It is a purely formal document, full of legal technicalities, and all that sort of thing. Come! come! sign your name, and let us have done as soon as possible."

"I ought surely to know what I am signing, Sir Percival, before I write my name?"

"Nonsense! What have women to do with business? I tell you again, you can't understand it."

"At any rate, let me try to understand it. Whenever Mr. Gilmore had any business for me to do, he always explained it first, and I always understood him."

"I dare say he did. He was your servant, and was obliged to explain. I am your husband, and am NOT obliged. How much longer do you mean to keep me here? I tell you again, there is no time for reading anything—the dog-cart is waiting at the door. Once for all, will you sign or will you not?"

She still had the pen in her hand, but she made no approach to signing her name with it.

"If my signature pledges me to anything," she said, "surely I have some claim to know what that pledge is?"

He lifted up the parchment, and struck it angrily on the table.

"Speak out!" he said. "You were always famous for telling the truth. Never mind Miss Halcombe, never mind Fosco—say, in plain terms, you distrust me."

The Count took one of his hands out of his belt and laid it on Sir Percival's shoulder. Sir Percival shook it off irritably. The Count put it on again with unruffled composure.

"Control your unfortunate temper, Percival," he said "Lady Glyde is right."

"Right!" cried Sir Percival. "A wife right in distrusting her husband!"

"It is unjust and cruel to accuse me of distrusting you," said Laura. "Ask Marian if I am not justified in wanting to know what this writing requires of me before I sign it."

"I won't have any appeals made to Miss Halcombe," retorted Sir Percival. "Miss Halcombe has nothing to do with the matter."

I had not spoken hitherto, and I would much rather not have spoken now. But the expression of distress in Laura's face when she turned it towards me, and the insolent injustice of her husband's conduct, left me no other alternative than to give my opinion, for her sake, as soon as I was asked for it.

"Excuse me, Sir Percival," I said—"but as one of the witnesses to the signature, I venture to think that I HAVE something to do with the matter. Laura's objection seems to me a perfectly

fair one, and speaking for myself only, I cannot assume the responsibility of witnessing her signature, unless she first understands what the writing is which you wish her to sign.”

“A cool declaration, upon my soul!” cried Sir Percival. “The next time you invite yourself to a man’s house, Miss Halcombe, I recommend you not to repay his hospitality by taking his wife’s side against him in a matter that doesn’t concern you.”

I started to my feet as suddenly as if he had struck me. If I had been a man, I would have knocked him down on the threshold of his own door, and have left his house, never on any earthly consideration to enter it again. But I was only a woman—and I loved his wife so dearly!

Thank God, that faithful love helped me, and I sat down again without saying a word. SHE knew what I had suffered and what I had suppressed. She ran round to me, with the tears streaming from her eyes. “Oh, Marian!” she whispered softly. “If my mother had been alive, she could have done no more for me!”

“Come back and sign!” cried Sir Percival from the other side of the table.

“Shall I?” she asked in my ear; “I will, if you tell me.”

“No,” I answered. “The right and the truth are with you—sign nothing, unless you have read it first.”

“Come back and sign!” he reiterated, in his loudest and angriest tones.

The Count, who had watched Laura and me with a close and silent attention, interposed for the second time.

“Percival!” he said. “I remember that I am in the presence of ladies. Be good enough, if you please, to remember it too.”

Sir Percival turned on him speechless with passion. The Count’s firm hand slowly tightened its grasp on his shoulder, and the Count’s steady voice quietly repeated, “Be good enough, if you please, to remember it too.”

They both looked at each other. Sir Percival slowly drew his shoulder from under the Count’s hand, slowly turned his face away from the Count’s eyes, doggedly looked down for a little while at the parchment on the table, and then spoke, with the sullen submission of a tamed animal, rather than the becoming resignation of a convinced man.

“I don’t want to offend anybody,” he said, “but my wife’s obstinacy is enough to try the patience of a saint. I have told her this is merely a formal document—and what more can she want? You may say what you please, but it is no part of a woman’s duty to set her husband at defiance. Once more, Lady Glyde, and for the last time, will you sign or will you not?”

Laura returned to his side of the table, and took up the pen again.

“I will sign with pleasure,” she said, “if you will only treat me as a responsible being. I care little what sacrifice is required of me, if it will affect no one else, and lead to no ill results—”

“Who talked of a sacrifice being required of You?” he broke in, with a half-suppressed return of his former violence.

“I only meant,” she resumed, “that I would refuse no concession which I could honourably make. If I have a scruple about signing my name to an engagement of which I know nothing, why should you visit it on me so severely? It is rather hard, I think, to treat Count Fosco’s scruples so much more indulgently than you have treated mine.”

This unfortunate, yet most natural, reference to the Count’s extraordinary power over her husband, indirect as it was, set Sir Percival’s smouldering temper on fire again in an instant.

“Scruples!” he repeated. “YOUR scruples! It is rather late in the day for you to be scrupulous. I should have thought you had got over all weakness of that sort, when you made a virtue of necessity by marrying me.”

The instant he spoke those words, Laura threw down the pen—looked at him with an expression in her eyes which, throughout all my experience of her, I had never seen in them before, and turned her back on him in dead silence.

This strong expression of the most open and the most bitter contempt was so entirely unlike herself, so utterly out of her character, that it silenced us all. There was something hidden, beyond a doubt, under the mere surface-brutality of the words which her husband had just addressed to her. There was some lurking insult beneath them, of which I was wholly ignorant, but which had left the mark of its profanation so plainly on her face that even a stranger might have seen it.

The Count, who was no stranger, saw it as distinctly as I did. When I left my chair to join Laura, I heard him whisper under his breath to Sir Percival, “You idiot!”

Laura walked before me to the door as I advanced, and at the same time her husband spoke to her once more.

“You positively refuse, then, to give me your signature?” he said, in the altered tone of a man who was conscious that he had let his own licence of language seriously injure him.

“After what you have just said to me,” she replied firmly, “I refuse my signature until I have read every line in that parchment from the first word to the last. Come away, Marian, we have remained here long enough.”

“One moment!” interposed the Count before Sir Percival could speak again—“one moment, Lady Glyde, I implore you!”

Laura would have left the room without noticing him, but I stopped her.

“Don’t make an enemy of the Count!” I whispered. “Whatever you do, don’t make an enemy of the Count!”

She yielded to me. I closed the door again, and we stood near it waiting. Sir Percival sat down at the table, with his elbow on the folded parchment, and his head resting on his clenched fist. The Count stood between us—master of the dreadful position in which we were placed, as he was master of everything else.

“Lady Glyde,” he said, with a gentleness which seemed to address itself to our forlorn situation instead of to ourselves, “pray pardon me if I venture to offer one suggestion, and pray believe that I speak out of my profound respect and my friendly regard for the mistress of this house.” He turned sharply towards Sir Percival. “Is it absolutely necessary,” he asked “that this thing here, under your elbow, should be signed to-day?”

“It is necessary to my plans and wishes,” returned the other sulkily. “But that consideration, as you may have noticed, has no influence with Lady Glyde.”

“Answer my plain question plainly. Can the business of the signature be put off till to-morrow—Yes or No?”

“Yes, if you will have it so.”

“Then what are you wasting your time for here? Let the signature wait till to-morrow—let it wait till you come back.”

Sir Percival looked up with a frown and an oath.

“You are taking a tone with me that I don’t like,” he said. “A tone I won’t bear from any man.”

“I am advising you for your good,” returned the Count, with a smile of quiet contempt. “Give yourself time—give Lady Glyde time. Have you forgotten that your dog-cart is waiting at the door? My tone surprises you—ha? I dare say it does—it is the tone of a man who can keep his temper. How many doses of good advice have I given you in my time? More than you can count.

Have I ever been wrong? I defy you to quote me an instance of it. Go! take your drive. The matter of the signature can wait till to-morrow. Let it wait—and renew it when you come back.”

Sir Percival hesitated and looked at his watch. His anxiety about the secret journey which he was to take that day, revived by the Count’s words, was now evidently disputing possession of his mind with his anxiety to obtain Laura’s signature. He considered for a little while, and then got up from his chair.

“It is easy to argue me down,” he said, “when I have no time to answer you. I will take your advice, Fosco—not because I want it, or believe in it, but because I can’t stop here any longer.” He paused, and looked round darkly at his wife. “If you don’t give me your signature when I come back to-morrow!” The rest was lost in the noise of his opening the book-case cupboard again, and locking up the parchment once more. He took his hat and gloves off the table, and made for the door. Laura and I drew back to let him pass. “Remember to-morrow!” he said to his wife, and went out.

We waited to give him time to cross the hall and drive away. The Count approached us while we were standing near the door.

“You have just seen Percival at his worst, Miss Halcombe,” he said. “As his old friend, I am sorry for him and ashamed of him. As his old friend, I promise you that he shall not break out to-morrow in the same disgraceful manner in which he has broken out to-day.”

Laura had taken my arm while he was speaking and she pressed it significantly when he had done. It would have been a hard trial to any woman to stand by and see the office of apologist for her husband’s misconduct quietly assumed by his male friend in her own house—and it was a trial to HER. I thanked the Count civilly, and let her out. Yes! I thanked him: for I felt already, with a sense of inexpressible helplessness and humiliation, that it was either his interest or his caprice to make sure of my continuing to reside at Blackwater Park, and I knew after Sir Percival’s conduct to me, that without the support of the Count’s influence, I could not hope to remain there. His influence, the influence of all others that I dreaded most, was actually the one tie which now held me to Laura in the hour of her utmost need!

We heard the wheels of the dog-cart crashing on the gravel of the drive as we came into the hall. Sir Percival had started on his journey.

“Where is he going to, Marian?” Laura whispered. “Every fresh thing he does seems to terrify me about the future. Have you any suspicions?”

After what she had undergone that morning, I was unwilling to tell her my suspicions.

“How should I know his secrets?” I said evasively.

“I wonder if the housekeeper knows?” she persisted.

“Certainly not,” I replied. “She must be quite as ignorant as we are.”

Laura shook her head doubtfully.

“Did you not hear from the housekeeper that there was a report of Anne Catherick having been seen in this neighbourhood? Don’t you think he may have gone away to look for her?”

“I would rather compose myself, Laura, by not thinking about it at all, and after what has happened, you had better follow my example. Come into my room, and rest and quiet yourself a little.”

We sat down together close to the window, and let the fragrant summer air breathe over our faces. “I am ashamed to look at you, Marian,” she said, “after what you submitted to downstairs, for my sake. Oh, my own love, I am almost heartbroken when I think of it! But I will try to make it up to you—I will indeed!”

“Hush! hush!” I replied; “don’t talk so. What is the trifling mortification of my pride compared to the dreadful sacrifice of your happiness?”

“You heard what he said to me?” she went on quickly and vehemently. “You heard the words—but you don’t know what they meant—you don’t know why I threw down the pen and turned my back on him.” She rose in sudden agitation, and walked about the room. “I have kept many things from your knowledge, Marian, for fear of distressing you, and making you unhappy at the outset of our new lives. You don’t know how he has used me. And yet you ought to know, for you saw how he used me to-day. You heard him sneer at my presuming to be scrupulous—you heard him say I had made a virtue of necessity in marrying him.” She sat down again, her face flushed deeply, and her hands twisted and twined together in her lap. “I can’t tell you about it now,” she said; “I shall burst out crying if I tell you now—later, Marian, when I am more sure of myself. My poor head aches, darling—aches, aches, aches. Where is your smelling-bottle? Let me talk to you about yourself. I wish I had given him my signature, for your sake. Shall I give it to him to-morrow? I would rather compromise myself than compromise you. After your taking my part against him, he will lay all the blame on you if I refuse again. What shall we do? Oh, for a friend to help us and advise us!—a friend we could really trust!”

She sighed bitterly. I saw in her face that she was thinking of Hartright—saw it the more plainly because her last words set me thinking of him too. In six months only from her marriage we wanted the faithful service he had offered to us in his farewell words. How little I once thought that we should ever want it at all!

“We must do what we can to help ourselves,” I said. “Let us try to talk it over calmly, Laura—let us do all in our power to decide for the best.”

Putting what she knew of her husband’s embarrassments and what I had heard of his conversation with the lawyer together, we arrived necessarily at the conclusion that the parchment in the library had been drawn up for the purpose of borrowing money, and that Laura’s signature was absolutely necessary to fit it for the attainment of Sir Percival’s object.

The second question, concerning the nature of the legal contract by which the money was to be obtained, and the degree of personal responsibility to which Laura might subject herself if she signed it in the dark, involved considerations which lay far beyond any knowledge and experience that either of us possessed. My own convictions led me to believe that the hidden contents of the parchment concealed a transaction of the meanest and the most fraudulent kind.

I had not formed this conclusion in consequence of Sir Percival’s refusal to show the writing or to explain it, for that refusal might well have proceeded from his obstinate disposition and his domineering temper alone. My sole motive for distrusting his honesty sprang from the change which I had observed in his language and his manners at Blackwater Park, a change which convinced me that he had been acting a part throughout the whole period of his probation at Limmeridge House. His elaborate delicacy, his ceremonious politeness which harmonised so agreeably with Mr. Gilmore’s old-fashioned notions, his modesty with Laura, his candour with me, his moderation with Mr. Fairlie—all these were the artifices of a mean, cunning, and brutal man, who had dropped his disguise when his practised duplicity had gained its end, and had openly shown himself in the library on that very day. I say nothing of the grief which this discovery caused me on Laura’s account, for it is not to be expressed by any words of mine. I only refer to it at all, because it decided me to oppose her signing the parchment, whatever the consequences might be, unless she was first made acquainted with the contents.

Under these circumstances, the one chance for us when to-morrow came was to be provided with an objection to giving the signature, which might rest on sufficiently firm commercial or

legal grounds to shake Sir Percival's resolution, and to make him suspect that we two women understood the laws and obligations of business as well as himself.

After some pondering, I determined to write to the only honest man within reach whom we could trust to help us discreetly in our forlorn situation. That man was Mr. Gilmore's partner, Mr. Kyrle, who conducted the business now that our old friend had been obliged to withdraw from it, and to leave London on account of his health. I explained to Laura that I had Mr. Gilmore's own authority for placing implicit confidence in his partner's integrity, discretion, and accurate knowledge of all her affairs, and with her full approval I sat down at once to write the letter, I began by stating our position to Mr. Kyrle exactly as it was, and then asked for his advice in return, expressed in plain, downright terms which he could comprehend without any danger of misinterpretations and mistakes. My letter was as short as I could possibly make it, and was, I hope, unencumbered by needless apologies and needless details.

Just as I was about to put the address on the envelope an obstacle was discovered by Laura, which in the effort and preoccupation of writing had escaped my mind altogether.

"How are we to get the answer in time?" she asked. "Your letter will not be delivered in London before to-morrow morning, and the post will not bring the reply here till the morning after."

The only way of overcoming this difficulty was to have the answer brought to us from the lawyer's office by a special messenger. I wrote a postscript to that effect, begging that the messenger might be despatched with the reply by the eleven o'clock morning train, which would bring him to our station at twenty minutes past one, and so enable him to reach Blackwater Park by two o'clock at the latest. He was to be directed to ask for me, to answer no questions addressed to him by any one else, and to deliver his letter into no hands but mine.

"In case Sir Percival should come back to-morrow before two o'clock," I said to Laura, "the wisest plan for you to adopt is to be out in the grounds all the morning with your book or your work, and not to appear at the house till the messenger has had time to arrive with the letter. I will wait here for him all the morning, to guard against any misadventures or mistakes. By following this arrangement I hope and believe we shall avoid being taken by surprise. Let us go down to the drawing-room now. We may excite suspicion if we remain shut up together too long."

"Suspicion?" she repeated. "Whose suspicion can we excite, now that Sir Percival has left the house? Do you mean Count Fosco?"

"Perhaps I do, Laura."

"You are beginning to dislike him as much as I do, Marian."

"No, not to dislike him. Dislike is always more or less associated with contempt—I can see nothing in the Count to despise."

"You are not afraid of him, are you?"

"Perhaps I am—a little."

"Afraid of him, after his interference in our favour to-day!"

"Yes. I am more afraid of his interference than I am of Sir Percival's violence. Remember what I said to you in the library. Whatever you do, Laura, don't make an enemy of the Count!"

We went downstairs. Laura entered the drawing-room, while I proceeded across the hall, with my letter in my hand, to put it into the post-bag, which hung against the wall opposite to me.

The house door was open, and as I crossed past it, I saw Count Fosco and his wife standing talking together on the steps outside, with their faces turned towards me.

The Countess came into the hall rather hastily, and asked if I had leisure enough for five minutes' private conversation. Feeling a little surprised by such an appeal from such a person, I put my letter into the bag, and replied that I was quite at her disposal. She took my arm with unaccustomed friendliness and familiarity, and instead of leading me into an empty room, drew me out with her to the belt of turf which surrounded the large fish-pond.

As we passed the Count on the steps he bowed and smiled, and then went at once into the house, pushing the hall door to after him, but not actually closing it.

The Countess walked me gently round the fish-pond. I expected to be made the depositary of some extraordinary confidence, and I was astonished to find that Madame Fosco's communication for my private ear was nothing more than a polite assurance of her sympathy for me, after what had happened in the library. Her husband had told her of all that had passed, and of the insolent manner in which Sir Percival had spoken to me. This information had so shocked and distressed her, on my account and on Laura's, that she had made up her mind, if anything of the sort happened again, to mark her sense of Sir Percival's outrageous conduct by leaving the house. The Count had approved of her idea, and she now hoped that I approved of it too.

I thought this a very strange proceeding on the part of such a remarkably reserved woman as Madame Fosco, especially after the interchange of sharp speeches which had passed between us during the conversation in the boat-house on that very morning. However, it was my plain duty to meet a polite and friendly advance on the part of one of my elders with a polite and friendly reply. I answered the Countess accordingly in her own tone, and then, thinking we had said all that was necessary on either side, made an attempt to get back to the house.

But Madame Fosco seemed resolved not to part with me, and to my unspeakable amazement, resolved also to talk. Hitherto the most silent of women, she now persecuted me with fluent conventionalities on the subject of married life, on the subject of Sir Percival and Laura, on the subject of her own happiness, on the subject of the late Mr. Fairlie's conduct to her in the matter of her legacy, and on half a dozen other subjects besides, until she had detained me walking round and round the fish-pond for more than half an hour, and had quite wearied me out. Whether she discovered this or not, I cannot say, but she stopped as abruptly as she had begun—looked towards the house door, resumed her icy manner in a moment, and dropped my arm of her own accord before I could think of an excuse for accomplishing my own release from her.

As I pushed open the door and entered the hall, I found myself suddenly face to face with the Count again. He was just putting a letter into the post-bag.

After he had dropped it in and had closed the bag, he asked me where I had left Madame Fosco. I told him, and he went out at the hall door immediately to join his wife. His manner when he spoke to me was so unusually quiet and subdued that I turned and looked after him, wondering if he were ill or out of spirits.

Why my next proceeding was to go straight up to the post-bag and take out my own letter and look at it again, with a vague distrust on me, and why the looking at it for the second time instantly suggested the idea to my mind of sealing the envelope for its greater security—are mysteries which are either too deep or too shallow for me to fathom. Women, as everybody knows, constantly act on impulses which they cannot explain even to themselves, and I can only suppose that one of those impulses was the hidden cause of my unaccountable conduct on this occasion.

Whatever influence animated me, I found cause to congratulate myself on having obeyed it as soon as I prepared to seal the letter in my own room. I had originally closed the envelope in the usual way by moistening the adhesive point and pressing it on the paper beneath, and when I

now tried it with my finger, after a lapse of full three-quarters of an hour, the envelope opened on the instant, without sticking or tearing. Perhaps I had fastened it insufficiently? Perhaps there might have been some defect in the adhesive gum?

Or, perhaps—No! it is quite revolting enough to feel that third conjecture stirring in my mind. I would rather not see it confronting me in plain black and white.

I almost dread to-morrow—so much depends on my discretion and self-control. There are two precautions, at all events, which I am sure not to forget. I must be careful to keep up friendly appearances with the Count, and I must be well on my guard when the messenger from the office comes here with the answer to my letter.

## V

June 17th.—When the dinner hour brought us together again, Count Fosco was in his usual excellent spirits. He exerted himself to interest and amuse us, as if he was determined to efface from our memories all recollection of what had passed in the library that afternoon. Lively descriptions of his adventures in travelling, amusing anecdotes of remarkable people whom he had met with abroad, quaint comparisons between the social customs of various nations, illustrated by examples drawn from men and women indiscriminately all over Europe, humorous confessions of the innocent follies of his own early life, when he ruled the fashions of a second-rate Italian town, and wrote preposterous romances on the French model for a second-rate Italian newspaper—all flowed in succession so easily and so gaily from his lips, and all addressed our various curiosities and various interests so directly and so delicately, that Laura and I listened to him with as much attention and, inconsistent as it may seem, with as much admiration also, as Madame Fosco herself. Women can resist a man's love, a man's fame, a man's personal appearance, and a man's money, but they cannot resist a man's tongue when he knows how to talk to them.

After dinner, while the favourable impression which he had produced on us was still vivid in our minds, the Count modestly withdrew to read in the library.

Laura proposed a stroll in the grounds to enjoy the close of the long evening. It was necessary in common politeness to ask Madame Fosco to join us, but this time she had apparently received her orders beforehand, and she begged we would kindly excuse her. "The Count will probably want a fresh supply of cigarettes," she remarked by way of apology, "and nobody can make them to his satisfaction but myself." Her cold blue eyes almost warmed as she spoke the words—she looked actually proud of being the officiating medium through which her lord and master composed himself with tobacco-smoke!

Laura and I went out together alone.

It was a misty, heavy evening. There was a sense of blight in the air; the flowers were drooping in the garden, and the ground was parched and dewless. The western heaven, as we saw it over the quiet trees, was of a pale yellow hue, and the sun was setting faintly in a haze. Coming rain seemed near—it would fall probably with the fall of night.

"Which way shall we go?" I asked

"Towards the lake, Marian, if you like," she answered.

"You seem unaccountably fond, Laura, of that dismal lake."

“No, not of the lake but of the scenery about it. The sand and heath and the fir-trees are the only objects I can discover, in all this large place, to remind me of Limmeridge. But we will walk in some other direction if you prefer it.”

“I have no favourite walks at Blackwater Park, my love. One is the same as another to me. Let us go to the lake—we may find it cooler in the open space than we find it here.”

We walked through the shadowy plantation in silence. The heaviness in the evening air oppressed us both, and when we reached the boat-house we were glad to sit down and rest inside.

A white fog hung low over the lake. The dense brown line of the trees on the opposite bank appeared above it, like a dwarf forest floating in the sky. The sandy ground, shelving downward from where we sat, was lost mysteriously in the outward layers of the fog. The silence was horrible. No rustling of the leaves—no bird’s note in the wood—no cry of water-fowl from the pools of the hidden lake. Even the croaking of the frogs had ceased to-night.

“It is very desolate and gloomy,” said Laura. “But we can be more alone here than anywhere else.”

She spoke quietly and looked at the wilderness of sand and mist with steady, thoughtful eyes. I could see that her mind was too much occupied to feel the dreary impressions from without which had fastened themselves already on mine.

“I promised, Marian, to tell you the truth about my married life, instead of leaving you any longer to guess it for yourself,” she began. “That secret is the first I have ever had from you, love, and I am determined it shall be the last. I was silent, as you know, for your sake—and perhaps a little for my own sake as well. It is very hard for a woman to confess that the man to whom she has given her whole life is the man of all others who cares least for the gift. If you were married yourself, Marian—and especially if you were happily married—you would feel for me as no single woman CAN feel, however kind and true she may be.”

What answer could I make? I could only take her hand and look at her with my whole heart as well as my eyes would let me.

“How often,” she went on, “I have heard you laughing over what you used to call your ‘poverty!’ how often you have made me mock-speeches of congratulation on my wealth! Oh, Marian, never laugh again. Thank God for your poverty—it has made you your own mistress, and has saved you from the lot that has fallen on ME.”

A sad beginning on the lips of a young wife!—sad in its quiet plain-spoken truth. The few days we had all passed together at Blackwater Park had been many enough to show me—to show any one—what her husband had married her for.

“You shall not be distressed,” she said, “by hearing how soon my disappointments and my trials began—or even by knowing what they were. It is bad enough to have them on my memory. If I tell you how he received the first and last attempt at remonstrance that I ever made, you will know how he has always treated me, as well as if I had described it in so many words. It was one day at Rome when we had ridden out together to the tomb of Cecilia Metella. The sky was calm and lovely, and the grand old ruin looked beautiful, and the remembrance that a husband’s love had raised it in the old time to a wife’s memory, made me feel more tenderly and more anxiously towards my husband than I had ever felt yet. ‘Would you build such a tomb for ME, Percival?’ I asked him. ‘You said you loved me dearly before we were married, and yet, since that time——’ I could get no farther. Marian! he was not even looking at me! I pulled down my veil, thinking it best not to let him see that the tears were in my eyes. I fancied he had not paid any attention to me, but he had. He said, ‘Come away,’ and laughed to himself as he helped me on to my horse. He mounted his own horse and laughed again as we rode away. ‘If I do build you a tomb,’ he

said, 'it will be done with your own money. I wonder whether Cecilia Metella had a fortune and paid for hers.' I made no reply—how could I, when I was crying behind my veil?' Ah, you light-complexioned women are all sulky,' he said. 'What do you want? compliments and soft speeches? Well! I'm in a good humour this morning. Consider the compliments paid and the speeches said.' Men little know when they say hard things to us how well we remember them, and how much harm they do us. It would have been better for me if I had gone on crying, but his contempt dried up my tears and hardened my heart. From that time, Marian, I never checked myself again in thinking of Walter Hartright. I let the memory of those happy days, when we were so fond of each other in secret, come back and comfort me. What else had I to look to for consolation? If we had been together you would have helped me to better things. I know it was wrong, darling, but tell me if I was wrong without any excuse."

I was obliged to turn my face from her. "Don't ask me!" I said. "Have I suffered as you have suffered? What right have I to decide?"

"I used to think of him," she pursued, dropping her voice and moving closer to me, "I used to think of him when Percival left me alone at night to go among the Opera people. I used to fancy what I might have been if it had pleased God to bless me with poverty, and if I had been his wife. I used to see myself in my neat cheap gown, sitting at home and waiting for him while he was earning our bread—sitting at home and working for him and loving him all the better because I had to work for him—seeing him come in tired and taking off his hat and coat for him, and, Marian, pleasing him with little dishes at dinner that I had learnt to make for his sake. Oh! I hope he is never lonely enough and sad enough to think of me and see me as I have thought of HIM and see HIM!"

As she said those melancholy words, all the lost tenderness returned to her voice, and all the lost beauty trembled back into her face. Her eyes rested as lovingly on the blighted, solitary, ill-omened view before us, as if they saw the friendly hills of Cumberland in the dim and threatening sky.

"Don't speak of Walter any more," I said, as soon as I could control myself. "Oh, Laura, spare us both the wretchedness of talking of him now!"

She roused herself, and looked at me tenderly.

"I would rather be silent about him for ever," she answered, "than cause you a moment's pain."

"It is in your interests," I pleaded; "it is for your sake that I speak. If your husband heard you—"

"It would not surprise him if he did hear me."

She made that strange reply with a weary calmness and coldness. The change in her manner, when she gave the answer, startled me almost as much as the answer itself.

"Not surprise him!" I repeated. "Laura! remember what you are saying—you frighten me!"

"It is true," she said; "it is what I wanted to tell you to-day, when we were talking in your room. My only secret when I opened my heart to him at Limmeridge was a harmless secret, Marian—you said so yourself. The name was all I kept from him, and he has discovered it."

I heard her, but I could say nothing. Her last words had killed the little hope that still lived in me.

"It happened at Rome," she went on, as wearily calm and cold as ever. "We were at a little party given to the English by some friends of Sir Percival's—Mr. and Mrs. Markland. Mrs. Markland had the reputation of sketching very beautifully, and some of the guests prevailed on her to show us her drawings. We all admired them, but something I said attracted her attention particularly to me. 'Surely you draw yourself?' she asked. 'I used to draw a little once,' I

answered, 'but I have given it up.' 'If you have once drawn,' she said, 'you may take to it again one of these days, and if you do, I wish you would let me recommend you a master.' I said nothing—you know why, Marian—and tried to change the conversation. But Mrs. Markland persisted. 'I have had all sorts of teachers,' she went on, 'but the best of all, the most intelligent and the most attentive, was a Mr. Hartright. If you ever take up your drawing again, do try him as a master. He is a young man—modest and gentlemanlike—I am sure you will like him. Think of those words being spoken to me publicly, in the presence of strangers—strangers who had been invited to meet the bride and bridegroom! I did all I could to control myself—I said nothing, and looked down close at the drawings. When I ventured to raise my head again, my eyes and my husband's eyes met, and I knew, by his look, that my face had betrayed me. 'We will see about Mr. Hartright,' he said, looking at me all the time, 'when we get back to England. I agree with you, Mrs. Markland—I think Lady Glyde is sure to like him.' He laid an emphasis on the last words which made my cheeks burn, and set my heart beating as if it would stifle me. Nothing more was said. We came away early. He was silent in the carriage driving back to the hotel. He helped me out, and followed me upstairs as usual. But the moment we were in the drawing-room, he locked the door, pushed me down into a chair, and stood over me with his hands on my shoulders. 'Ever since that morning when you made your audacious confession to me at Limmeridge,' he said, 'I have wanted to find out the man, and I found him in your face to-night. Your drawing-master was the man, and his name is Hartright. You shall repent it, and he shall repent it, to the last hour of your lives. Now go to bed and dream of him if you like, with the marks of my horsewhip on his shoulders.' Whenever he is angry with me now he refers to what I acknowledged to him in your presence with a sneer or a threat. I have no power to prevent him from putting his own horrible construction on the confidence I placed in him. I have no influence to make him believe me, or to keep him silent. You looked surprised to-day when you heard him tell me that I had made a virtue of necessity in marrying him. You will not be surprised again when you hear him repeat it, the next time he is out of temper—Oh, Marian! don't! don't! you hurt me!"

I had caught her in my arms, and the sting and torment of my remorse had closed them round her like a vice. Yes! my remorse. The white despair of Walter's face, when my cruel words struck him to the heart in the summer-house at Limmeridge, rose before me in mute, unendurable reproach. My hand had pointed the way which led the man my sister loved, step by step, far from his country and his friends. Between those two young hearts I had stood, to sunder them for ever, the one from the other, and his life and her life lay wasted before me alike in witness of the deed. I had done this, and done it for Sir Percival Glyde. For Sir Percival Glyde.

I heard her speaking, and I knew by the tone of her voice that she was comforting me—I, who deserved nothing but the reproach of her silence! How long it was before I mastered the absorbing misery of my own thoughts, I cannot tell. I was first conscious that she was kissing me, and then my eyes seemed to wake on a sudden to their sense of outward things, and I knew that I was looking mechanically straight before me at the prospect of the lake.

"It is late," I heard her whisper. "It will be dark in the plantation." She shook my arm and repeated, "Marian! it will be dark in the plantation."

"Give me a minute longer," I said—"a minute, to get better in."

I was afraid to trust myself to look at her yet, and I kept my eyes fixed on the view.

It WAS late. The dense brown line of trees in the sky had faded in the gathering darkness to the faint resemblance of a long wreath of smoke. The mist over the lake below had stealthily

enlarged, and advanced on us. The silence was as breathless as ever, but the horror of it had gone, and the solemn mystery of its stillness was all that remained.

“We are far from the house,” she whispered. “Let us go back.”

She stopped suddenly, and turned her face from me towards the entrance of the boat-house.

“Marian!” she said, trembling violently. “Do you see nothing? Look!”

“Where?”

“Down there, below us.”

She pointed. My eyes followed her hand, and I saw it too.

A living figure was moving over the waste of heath in the distance. It crossed our range of view from the boat-house, and passed darkly along the outer edge of the mist. It stopped far off, in front of us—waited—and passed on; moving slowly, with the white cloud of mist behind it and above it—slowly, slowly, till it glided by the edge of the boat-house, and we saw it no more.

We were both unnerved by what had passed between us that evening. Some minutes elapsed before Laura would venture into the plantation, and before I could make up my mind to lead her back to the house.

“Was it a man or a woman?” she asked in a whisper, as we moved at last into the dark dampness of the outer air.

“I am not certain.”

“Which do you think?”

“It looked like a woman.”

“I was afraid it was a man in a long cloak.”

“It may be a man. In this dim light it is not possible to be certain.”

“Wait, Marian! I’m frightened—I don’t see the path. Suppose the figure should follow us?”

“Not at all likely, Laura. There is really nothing to be alarmed about. The shores of the lake are not far from the village, and they are free to any one to walk on by day or night. It is only wonderful we have seen no living creature there before.”

We were now in the plantation. It was very dark—so dark, that we found some difficulty in keeping the path. I gave Laura my arm, and we walked as fast as we could on our way back.

Before we were half-way through she stopped, and forced me to stop with her. She was listening.

“Hush,” she whispered. “I hear something behind us.”

“Dead leaves,” I said to cheer her, “or a twig blown off the trees.”

“It is summer time, Marian, and there is not a breath of wind. Listen!”

I heard the sound too—a sound like a light footstep following us.

“No matter who it is, or what it is,” I said, “let us walk on. In another minute, if there is anything to alarm us, we shall be near enough to the house to be heard.”

We went on quickly—so quickly, that Laura was breathless by the time we were nearly through the plantation, and within sight of the lighted windows.

I waited a moment to give her breathing-time. Just as we were about to proceed she stopped me again, and signed to me with her hand to listen once more. We both heard distinctly a long, heavy sigh behind us, in the black depths of the trees.

“Who’s there?” I called out.

There was no answer.

“Who’s there?” I repeated.

An instant of silence followed, and then we heard the light fall of the footsteps again, fainter and fainter—sinking away into the darkness—sinking, sinking, sinking—till they were lost in the silence.

We hurried out from the trees to the open lawn beyond crossed it rapidly, and without another word passing between us, reached the house.

In the light of the hall-lamp Laura looked at me, with white cheeks and startled eyes.

“I am half dead with fear,” she said. “Who could it have been?”

“We will try to guess to-morrow,” I replied. “In the meantime say nothing to any one of what we have heard and seen.

“Why not?”

“Because silence is safe, and we have need of safety in this house.”

I sent Laura upstairs immediately, waited a minute to take off my hat and put my hair smooth, and then went at once to make my first investigations in the library, on pretence of searching for a book.

There sat the Count, filling out the largest easy-chair in the house, smoking and reading calmly, with his feet on an ottoman, his cravat across his knees, and his shirt collar wide open. And there sat Madame Fosco, like a quiet child, on a stool by his side, making cigarettes. Neither husband nor wife could, by any possibility, have been out late that evening, and have just got back to the house in a hurry. I felt that my object in visiting the library was answered the moment I set eyes on them.

Count Fosco rose in polite confusion and tied his cravat on when I entered the room.

“Pray don’t let me disturb you,” I said. “I have only come here to get a book.”

“All unfortunate men of my size suffer from the heat,” said the Count, refreshing himself gravely with a large green fan. “I wish I could change places with my excellent wife. She is as cool at this moment as a fish in the pond outside.”

The Countess allowed herself to thaw under the influence of her husband’s quaint comparison. “I am never warm, Miss Halcombe,” she remarked, with the modest air of a woman who was confessing to one of her own merits.

“Have you and Lady Glyde been out this evening?” asked the Count, while I was taking a book from the shelves to preserve appearances.

“Yes, we went out to get a little air.”

“May I ask in what direction?”

“In the direction of the lake—as far as the boat-house.”

“Aha? As far as the boat-house?”

Under other circumstances I might have resented his curiosity. But to-night I hailed it as another proof that neither he nor his wife were connected with the mysterious appearance at the lake.

“No more adventures, I suppose, this evening?” he went on. “No more discoveries, like your discovery of the wounded dog?”

He fixed his unfathomable grey eyes on me, with that cold, clear, irresistible glitter in them which always forces me to look at him, and always makes me uneasy while I do look. An unutterable suspicion that his mind is prying into mine overcomes me at these times, and it overcame me now.

“No,” I said shortly; “no adventures—no discoveries.”

I tried to look away from him and leave the room. Strange as it seems, I hardly think I should have succeeded in the attempt if Madame Fosco had not helped me by causing him to move and look away first.

“Count, you are keeping Miss Halcombe standing,” she said.

The moment he turned round to get me a chair, I seized my opportunity—thanked him—made my excuses—and slipped out.

An hour later, when Laura’s maid happened to be in her mistress’s room, I took occasion to refer to the closeness of the night, with a view to ascertaining next how the servants had been passing their time.

“Have you been suffering much from the heat downstairs?” I asked.

“No, miss,” said the girl, “we have not felt it to speak of.”

“You have been out in the woods then, I suppose?”

“Some of us thought of going, miss. But cook said she should take her chair into the cool court-yard, outside the kitchen door, and on second thoughts, all the rest of us took our chairs out there too.”

The housekeeper was now the only person who remained to be accounted for.

“Is Mrs. Michelson gone to bed yet?” I inquired.

“I should think not, miss,” said the girl, smiling. “Mrs. Michelson is more likely to be getting up just now than going to bed.”

“Why? What do you mean? Has Mrs. Michelson been taking to her bed in the daytime?”

“No, miss, not exactly, but the next thing to it. She’s been asleep all the evening on the sofa in her own room.”

Putting together what I observed for myself in the library, and what I have just heard from Laura’s maid, one conclusion seems inevitable. The figure we saw at the lake was not the figure of Madame Fosco, of her husband, or of any of the servants. The footsteps we heard behind us were not the footsteps of any one belonging to the house.

Who could it have been?

It seems useless to inquire. I cannot even decide whether the figure was a man’s or a woman’s. I can only say that I think it was a woman’s,