VI

June 18th.—The misery of self-reproach which I suffered yesterday evening, on hearing what Laura told me in the boat-house, returned in the loneliness of the night, and kept me waking and wretched for hours.

I lighted my candle at last, and searched through my old journals to see what my share in the fatal error of her marriage had really been, and what I might have once done to save her from it. The result soothed me a little for it showed that, however blindly and ignorantly I acted, I acted for the best. Crying generally does me harm; but it was not so last night—I think it relieved me. I rose this morning with a settled resolution and a quiet mind. Nothing Sir Percival can say or do shall ever irritate me again, or make me forget for one moment that I am staying here in defiance of mortifications, insults, and threats, for Laura's service and for Laura's sake.

The speculations in which we might have indulged this morning, on the subject of the figure at the lake and the foot-steps in the plantation, have been all suspended by a trifling accident which has caused Laura great regret. She has lost the little brooch I gave her for a keepsake on the day before her marriage. As she wore it when we went out yesterday evening we can only suppose that it must have dropped from her dress, either in the boat-house or on our way back. The servants have been sent to search, and have returned unsuccessful. And now Laura herself has gone to look for it. Whether she finds it or not the loss will help to excuse her absence from the house. if Sir Percival returns before the letter from Mr. Gilmore's partner is placed in my hands.

One o'clock has just struck. I am considering whether I had better wait here for the arrival of the messenger from London, or slip away quietly, and watch for him outside the lodge gate.

My suspicion of everybody and everything in this house inclines me to think that the second plan may be the best. The Count is safe in the breakfast-room. I heard him, through the door, as I ran upstairs ten minutes since, exercising his canary-birds at their tricks:—"Come out on my little finger, my pret-pret-pretties! Come out, and hop upstairs! One, two, three—and up! Three, two, one—and down! One, two, three—twit-twit-twit-tweet!" The birds burst into their usual ecstasy of singing, and the Count chirruped and whistled at them in return, as if he was a bird himself. My room door is open, and I can hear the shrill singing and whistling at this very moment. If I am really to slip out without being observed, now is my time.

FOUR O'CLOCK. The three hours that have passed since I made my last entry have turned the whole march of events at Blackwater Park in a new direction. Whether for good or for evil, I cannot and dare not decide.

Let me get back first to the place at which I left off, or I shall lose myself in the confusion of my own thoughts.

I went out, as I had proposed, to meet the messenger with my letter from London at the lodge gate. On the stairs I saw no one. In the hall I heard the Count still exercising his birds. But on crossing the quadrangle outside, I passed Madame Fosco, walking by herself in her favourite circle, round and round the great fish- pond. I at once slackened my pace, so as to avoid all appearance of being in a hurry, and even went the length, for caution's sake, of inquiring if she thought of going out before lunch. She smiled at me in the friendliest manner—said she preferred remaining near the house, nodded pleasantly, and re-entered the hall. I looked back, and saw that she had closed the door before I had opened the wicket by the side of the carriage gates.

In less than a quarter of an hour I reached the lodge.

The lane outside took a sudden turn to the left, ran on straight for a hundred yards or so, and then took another sharp turn to the right to join the high-road. Between these two turns, hidden

from the lodge on one side, and from the way to the station on the other, I waited, walking backwards and forwards. High hedges were on either side of me, and for twenty minutes, by my watch, I neither saw nor heard anything. At the end of that time the sound of a carriage caught my ear, and I was met, as I advanced towards the second turning, by a fly from the railway. I made a sign to the driver to stop. As he obeyed me a respectable-looking man put his head out of the window to see what was the matter.

"I beg your pardon," I said, "but am I right in supposing that you are going to Blackwater Park?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"With a letter for any one?"

"With a letter for Miss Halcombe, ma'am."

"You may give me the letter. I am Miss Halcombe."

The man touched his hat, got out of the fly immediately, and gave me the letter.

I opened it at once and read these lines. I copy them here, thinking it best to destroy the original for caution's sake.

> "DEAR MADAM,—Your letter received this morning has caused me very great anxiety. I will reply to it as briefly and plainly as possible.
>
> "My careful consideration of the statement made by yourself, and my knowledge of Lady Glyde's position, as defined in the settlement, lead me, I regret to say, to the conclusion that a loan of the trust money to Sir Percival (or, in other words, a loan of some portion of the twenty thousand pounds of Lady Glyde's fortune) is in contemplation, and that she is made a party to the deed, in order to secure her approval of a flagrant breach of trust, and to have her signature produced against her if she should complain hereafter. It is impossible, on any other supposition, to account, situated as she is, for her execution to a deed of any kind being wanted at all.
>
> "In the event of Lady Glyde's signing such a document, as I am compelled to suppose the deed in question to be, her trustees would be at liberty to advance money to Sir Percival out of her twenty thousand pounds. If the amount so lent should not he paid back, and if Lady Glyde should have children, their fortune will then be diminished by the sum, large or small, so advanced. In plainer terms still, the transaction, for anything that Lady Glyde knows to the contrary, may be a fraud upon her unborn children.
>
> "Under these serious circumstances, I would recommend Lady Glyde to assign as a reason for withholding her signature, that she wishes the deed to be first submitted to myself, as her family solicitor (in the absence of my partner, Mr. Gilmore). No reasonable objection can be made to taking this course—for, if the transaction is an honourable one, there will necessarily be no difficulty in my giving my approval.
>
> "Sincerely assuring you of my readiness to afford any additional help or advice that may be wanted, I beg to remain, Madam, your faithful servant,
>
> WILLIAM KYRLE.

I read this kind and sensible letter very thankfully. It supplied Laura with a reason for objecting to the signature which was unanswerable, and which we could both of us understand. The messenger waited near me while I was reading to receive his directions when I had done,

"Will you be good enough to say that I understand the letter, and that I am very much obliged?" I said. "There is no other reply necessary at present."

Exactly at the moment when I was speaking those words, holding the letter open in my hand, Count Fosco turned the corner of the lane from the high-road, and stood before me as if he had sprung up out of the earth.

The suddenness of his appearance, in the very last place under heaven in which I should have expected to see him, took me completely by surprise. The messenger wished me good-morning, and got into the fly again. I could not say a word to him—I was not even able to return his bow. The conviction that I was discovered—and by that man, of all others—absolutely petrified me.

"Are you going back to the house, Miss Halcombe?" he inquired, without showing the least surprise on his side, and without even looking after the fly, which drove off while he was speaking to me.

I collected myself sufficiently to make a sign in the affirmative.

"I am going back too," he said. "Pray allow me the pleasure of accompanying you. Will you take my arm? You look surprised at seeing me!"

I took his arm. The first of my scattered senses that came back was the sense that warned me to sacrifice anything rather than make an enemy of him. "You look surprised at seeing me!" he repeated in his quietly pertinacious way.

"I thought, Count, I heard you with your birds in the breakfast- room," I answered, as quietly and firmly as I could.

"Surely. But my little feathered children, dear lady, are only too like other children. They have their days of perversity, and this morning was one of them. My wife came in as I was putting them back in their cage, and said she had left you going out alone for a walk. You told her so, did you not?"

"Certainly."

"Well, Miss Halcombe, the pleasure of accompanying you was too great a temptation for me to resist. At my age there is no harm in confessing so much as that, is there? I seized my hat, and set off to offer myself as your escort. Even so fat an old man as Fosco is surely better than no escort at all? I took the wrong path—I came back in despair, and here I am, arrived (may I say it?) at the height of my wishes."

He talked on in this complimentary strain with a fluency which left me no exertion to make beyond the effort of maintaining my composure. He never referred in the most distant manner to what he had seen in the lane, or to the letter which I still had in my hand. This ominous discretion helped to convince me that he must have surprised, by the most dishonourable means, the secret of my application in Laura's interest to the lawyer; and that, having now assured himself of the private manner in which I had received the answer, he had discovered enough to suit his purposes, and was only bent on trying to quiet the suspicions which he knew he must have aroused in my mind. I was wise enough, under these circumstances, not to attempt to deceive him by plausible explanations, and woman enough, notwithstanding my dread of him, to feel as if my hand was tainted by resting on his arm.

On the drive in front of the house we met the dog-cart being taken round to the stables. Sir Percival had just returned. He came out to meet us at the house-door. Whatever other results his journey might have had, it had not ended in softening his savage temper.

"Oh! here are two of you come back," he said, with a lowering face. "What is the meaning of the house being deserted in this way? Where is Lady Glyde?"

I told him of the loss of the brooch, and said that Laura had gone into the plantation to look for it.

"Brooch or no brooch," he growled sulkily, "I recommend her not to forget her appointment in the library this afternoon. I shall expect to see her in half an hour."

I took my hand from the Count's arm, and slowly ascended the steps. He honoured me with one of his magnificent bows, and then addressed himself gaily to the scowling master of the house.

"Tell me, Percival," he said, "have you had a pleasant drive? And has your pretty shining Brown Molly come back at all tired?"

"Brown Molly be hanged—and the drive too! I want my lunch."

"And I want five minutes' talk with you, Percival, first," returned the Count. "Five minutes' talk, my friend, here on the grass."

"What about?"

"About business that very much concerns you."

I lingered long enough in passing through the hall-door to hear this question and answer, and to see Sir Percival thrust his hands into his pockets in sullen hesitation.

"If you want to badger me with any more of your infernal scruples," he said, "I for one won't hear them. I want my lunch."

"Come out here and speak to me," repeated the Count, still perfectly uninfluenced by the rudest speech that his friend could make to him.

Sir Percival descended the steps. The Count took him by the arm, and walked him away gently. The "business," I was sure, referred to the question of the signature. They were speaking of Laura and of me beyond a doubt. I felt heart-sick and faint with anxiety. It might be of the last importance to both of us to know what they were saying to each other at that moment, and not one word of it could by any possibility reach my ears.

I walked about the house, from room to room, with the lawyer's letter in my bosom (I was afraid by this time even to trust it under lock and key), till the oppression of my suspense half maddened me. There were no signs of Laura's return, and I thought of going out to look for her. But my strength was so exhausted by the trials and anxieties of the morning that the heat of the day quite overpowered me, and after an attempt to get to the door I was obliged to return to the drawing-room and lie down on the nearest sofa to recover.

I was just composing myself when the door opened softly and the Count looked in.

"A thousand pardons, Miss Halcombe," he said; "I only venture to disturb you because I am the bearer of good news. Percival—who is capricious in everything, as you know—has seen fit to alter his mind at the last moment, and the business of the signature is put off for the present. A great relief to all of us, Miss Halcombe, as I see with pleasure in your face. Pray present my best respects and felicitations, when you mention this pleasant change of circumstances to Lady Glyde."

He left me before I had recovered my astonishment. There could be no doubt that this extraordinary alteration of purpose in the matter of the signature was due to his influence, and that his discovery of my application to London yesterday, and of my having received an answer to it to-day, had offered him the means of interfering with certain success.

I felt these impressions, but my mind seemed to share the exhaustion of my body, and I was in no condition to dwell on them with any useful reference to the doubtful present or the threatening future. I tried a second time to run out and find Laura, but my head was giddy and my knees trembled under me. There was no choice but to give it up again and return to the sofa, sorely against my will.

The quiet in the house, and the low murmuring hum of summer insects outside the open window, soothed me. My eyes closed of themselves, and I passed gradually into a strange condition, which was not waking—for I knew nothing of what was going on about me, and not sleeping—for I was conscious of my own repose. In this state my fevered mind broke loose from me, while my weary body was at rest, and in a trance, or day-dream of my fancy—I know not what to call it—I saw Walter Hartright. I had not thought of him since I rose that morning—Laura had not said one word to me either directly or indirectly referring to him—and yet I saw him now as plainly as if the past time had returned, and we were both together again at Limmeridge House.

He appeared to me as one among many other men, none of whose faces I could plainly discern. They were all lying on the steps of an immense ruined temple. Colossal tropical trees—with rank creepers twining endlessly about their trunks, and hideous stone idols glimmering and grinning at intervals behind leaves and stalks and branches—surrounded the temple and shut out the sky, and threw a dismal shadow over the forlorn band of men on the steps. White exhalations twisted and curled up stealthily from the ground, approached the men in wreaths like smoke, touched them, and stretched them out dead, one by one, in the places where they lay. An agony of pity and fear for Walter loosened my tongue, and I implored him to escape. “Come back, come back!” I said. “Remember your promise to HER and to ME. Come back to us before the Pestilence reaches you and lays you dead like the rest!”

He looked at me with an unearthly quiet in his face. “Wait,” he said, “I shall come back. The night when I met the lost Woman on the highway was the night which set my life apart to be the instrument of a Design that is yet unseen. Here, lost in the wilderness, or there, welcomed back in the land of my birth, I am still walking on the dark road which leads me, and you, and the sister of your love and mine, to the unknown Retribution and the inevitable End. Wait and look. The Pestilence which touches the rest will pass ME.”

I saw him again. He was still in the forest, and the numbers of his lost companions had dwindled to very few. The temple was gone, and the idols were gone—and in their place the figures of dark, dwarfish men lurked murderously among the trees, with bows in their hands, and arrows fitted to the string. Once more I feared for Walter, and cried out to warn him. Once more he turned to me, with the immovable quiet in his face.

“Another step,” he said, “on the dark road. Wait and look. The arrows that strike the rest will spare me.”

I saw him for the third time in a wrecked ship, stranded on a wild, sandy shore. The overloaded boats were making away from him for the land, and he alone was left to sink with the ship. I cried to him to hail the hindmost boat, and to make a last effort for his life. The quiet face looked at me in return, and the unmoved voice gave me back the changeless reply. “Another step on the journey. Wait and look. The Sea which drowns the rest will spare me.”

I saw him for the last time. He was kneeling by a tomb of white marble, and the shadow of a veiled woman rose out of the grave beneath and waited by his side. The unearthly quiet of his face had changed to an unearthly sorrow. But the terrible certainty of his words remained the same. “Darker and darker,” he said; “farther and farther yet. Death takes the good, the beautiful, and the young—and spares me. The Pestilence that wastes, the Arrow that strikes, the Sea that drowns, the Grave that closes over Love and Hope, are steps of my journey, and take me nearer and nearer to the End.”

My heart sank under a dread beyond words, under a grief beyond tears. The darkness closed round the pilgrim at the marble tomb— closed round the veiled woman from the grave—closed round the dreamer who looked on them. I saw and heard no more.

I was aroused by a hand laid on my shoulder. It was Laura's.

She had dropped on her knees by the side of the sofa. Her face was flushed and agitated, and her eyes met mine in a wild bewildered manner. I started the instant I saw her.

"What has happened?" I asked. "What has frightened you?"

She looked round at the half-open door, put her lips close to my ear, and answered in a whisper—

"Marian!—the figure at the lake—the footsteps last night—I've just seen her! I've just spoken to her!"

"Who, for Heaven's sake?"

"Anne Catherick."

I was so startled by the disturbance in Laura's face and manner, and so dismayed by the first waking impressions of my dream, that I was not fit to bear the revelation which burst upon me when that name passed her lips. I could only stand rooted to the floor, looking at her in breathless silence.

She was too much absorbed by what had happened to notice the effect which her reply had produced on me. "I have seen Anne Catherick! I have spoken to Anne Catherick!" she repeated as if I had not heard her. "Oh, Marian, I have such things to tell you! Come away—we may be interrupted here—come at once into my room."

With those eager words she caught me by the hand, and led me through the library, to the end room on the ground floor, which had been fitted up for her own especial use. No third person, except her maid, could have any excuse for surprising us here. She pushed me in before her, locked the door, and drew the chintz curtains that hung over the inside.

The strange, stunned feeling which had taken possession of me still remained. But a growing conviction that the complications which had long threatened to gather about her, and to gather about me, had suddenly closed fast round us both, was now beginning to penetrate my mind. I could not express it in words—I could hardly even realise it dimly in my own thoughts. "Anne Catherick!" I whispered to myself, with useless, helpless reiteration—"Anne Catherick!"

Laura drew me to the nearest seat, an ottoman in the middle of the room. "Look!" she said, "look here!"—and pointed to the bosom of her dress.

I saw, for the first time, that the lost brooch was pinned in its place again. There was something real in the sight of it, something real in the touching of it afterwards, which seemed to steady the whirl and confusion in my thoughts, and to help me to compose myself.

"Where did you find your brooch?" The first words I could say to her were the words which put that trivial question at that important moment.

"SHE found it, Marian."

"Where?"

"On the floor of the boat-house. Oh, how shall I begin—how shall I tell you about it! She talked to me so strangely—she looked so fearfully ill—she left me so suddenly!"

Her voice rose as the tumult of her recollections pressed upon her mind. The inveterate distrust which weighs, night and day, on my spirits in this house, instantly roused me to warn her—just as the sight of the brooch had roused me to question her, the moment before.

"Speak low," I said. "The window is open, and the garden path runs beneath it. Begin at the beginning, Laura. Tell me, word for word, what passed between that woman and you."

“Shall I close the window?”

“No, only speak low—only remember that Anne Catherick is a dangerous subject under your husband’s roof. Where did you first see her?”

“At the boat-house, Marian. I went out, as you know, to find my brooch, and I walked along the path through the plantation, looking down on the ground carefully at every step. In that way I got on, after a long time, to the boat-house, and as soon as I was inside it, I went on my knees to hunt over the floor. I was still searching with my back to the doorway, when I heard a soft, strange voice behind me say, ‘Miss Fairlie.’ ”

“Miss Fairlie!”

“Yes, my old name—the dear, familiar name that I thought I had parted from for ever. I started up—not frightened, the voice was too kind and gentle to frighten anybody—but very much surprised. There, looking at me from the doorway, stood a woman, whose face I never remembered to have seen before—”

“How was she dressed?”

“She had a neat, pretty white gown on, and over it a poor worn thin dark shawl. Her bonnet was of brown straw, as poor and worn as the shawl. I was struck by the difference between her gown and the rest of her dress, and she saw that I noticed it. ‘Don’t look at my bonnet and shawl,’ she said, speaking in a quick, breathless, sudden way; ‘if I mustn’t wear white, I don’t care what I wear. Look at my gown as much as you please—I’m not ashamed of that.’ Very strange, was it not? Before I could say anything to soothe her, she held out one of her hands, and I saw my brooch in it. I was so pleased and so grateful, that I went quite close to her to say what I really felt. ‘Are you thankful enough to do me one little kindness?’ she asked. ‘Yes, indeed,’ I answered, ‘any kindness in my power I shall be glad to show you.’ ‘Then let me pin your brooch on for you, now I have found it.’ Her request was so unexpected, Marian, and she made it with such extraordinary eagerness, that I drew back a step or two, not well knowing what to do. ‘Ah!’ she said, ‘your mother would have let me pin on the brooch.’ There was something in her voice and her look, as well as in her mentioning my mother in that reproachful manner, which made me ashamed of my distrust. I took her hand with the brooch in it, and put it up gently on the bosom of my dress. ‘You knew my mother?’ I said. ‘Was it very long ago? have I ever seen you before?’ Her hands were busy fastening the brooch: she stopped and pressed them against my breast. ‘You don’t remember a fine spring day at Limmeridge,’ she said, ‘and your mother walking down the path that led to the school, with a little girl on each side of her? I have had nothing else to think of since, and I remember it. You were one of the little girls, and I was the other. Pretty, clever Miss Fairlie, and poor dazed Anne Catherick were nearer to each other then than they are now!’ ”

“Did you remember her, Laura, when she told you her name?”

“Yes, I remembered your asking me about Anne Catherick at Limmeridge, and your saying that she had once been considered like me.”

“What reminded you of that, Laura?”

“SHE reminded me. While I was looking at her, while she was very close to me, it came over my mind suddenly that we were like each other! Her face was pale and thin and weary—but the sight of it startled me, as if it had been the sight of my own face in the glass after a long illness. The discovery—I don’t know why—gave me such a shock, that I was perfectly incapable of speaking to her for the moment.”

“Did she seem hurt by your silence?”

"I am afraid she was hurt by it. 'You have not got your mother's face,' she said, 'or your mother's heart. Your mother's face was dark, and your mother's heart, Miss Fairlie, was the heart of an angel.' 'I am sure I feel kindly towards you,' I said, 'though I may not be able to express it as I ought. Why do you call me Miss Fairlie?——' 'Because I love the name of Fairlie and hate the name of Glyde,' she broke out violently. I had seen nothing like madness in her before this, but I fancied I saw it now in her eyes. 'I only thought you might not know I was married,' I said, remembering the wild letter she wrote to me at Limmeridge, and trying to quiet her. She sighed bitterly, and turned away from me. 'Not know you were married?' she repeated. 'I am here BECAUSE you are married. I am here to make atonement to you, before I meet your mother in the world beyond the grave.' She drew farther and farther away from me, till she was out of the boat- house, and then she watched and listened for a little while. When she turned round to speak again, instead of coming back, she stopped where she was, looking in at me, with a hand on each side of the entrance. 'Did you see me at the lake last night?' she said. 'Did you hear me following you in the wood? I have been waiting for days together to speak to you alone—I have left the only friend I have in the world, anxious and frightened about me— I have risked being shut up again in the mad-house—and all for your sake, Miss Fairlie, all for your sake.' Her words alarmed me, Marian, and yet there was something in the way she spoke that made me pity her with all my heart. I am sure my pity must have been sincere, for it made me bold enough to ask the poor creature to come in, and sit down in the boat-house, by my side."

"Did she do so?"

"No. She shook her head, and told me she must stop where she was, to watch and listen, and see that no third person surprised us. And from first to last, there she waited at the entrance, with a hand on each side of it, sometimes bending in suddenly to speak to me, sometimes drawing back suddenly to look about her. 'I was here yesterday,' she said, 'before it came dark, and I heard you, and the lady with you, talking together. I heard you tell her about your husband. I heard you say you had no influence to make him believe you, and no influence to keep him silent. Ah! I knew what those words meant—my conscience told me while I was listening. Why did I ever let you marry him! Oh, my fear—my mad, miserable, wicked fear!—'She covered up her face in her poor worn shawl, and moaned and murmured to herself behind it. I began to be afraid she might break out into some terrible despair which neither she nor I could master. 'Try to quiet yourself,' I said; 'try to tell me how you might have prevented my marriage.' She took the shawl from her face, and looked at me vacantly. 'I ought to have had heart enough to stop at Limmeridge,' she answered. 'I ought never to have let the news of his coming there frighten me away. I ought to have warned you and saved you before it was too late. Why did I only have courage enough to write you that letter? Why did I only do harm, when I wanted and meant to do good? Oh, my fear—my mad, miserable, wicked fear! 'She repeated those words again, and hid her face again in the end of her poor worn shawl. It was dreadful to see her, and dreadful to hear her."

"Surely, Laura, you asked what the fear was which she dwelt on so earnestly?"

"Yes, I asked that."

"And what did she say?"

"She asked me in return, if I should not be afraid of a man who had shut me up in a mad-house, and who would shut me up again, if he could? I said, 'Are you afraid still? Surely you would not be here if you were afraid now?' 'No,' she said, 'I am not afraid now.' I asked why not. She suddenly bent forward into the boat- house, and said, 'Can't you guess why?' I shook my head. 'Look at me,' she went on. I told her I was grieved to see that she looked very sorrowful and

very ill. She smiled for the first time. ‘Ill?’ she repeated; ‘I’m dying. You know why I’m not afraid of him now. Do you think I shall meet your mother in heaven? Will she forgive me if I do?’ I was so shocked and so startled, that I could make no reply. ‘I have been thinking of it,’ she went on, ‘all the time I have been in hiding from your husband, all the time I lay ill. My thoughts have driven me here—I want to make atonement—I want to undo all I can of the harm I once did.’ I begged her as earnestly as I could to tell me what she meant. She still looked at me with fixed vacant eyes. ‘SHALL I undo the harm?’ she said to herself doubtfully. ‘You have friends to take your part. If YOU know his Secret, he will be afraid of you, he won’t dare use you as he used me. He must treat you mercifully for his own sake, if he is afraid of you and your friends. And if he treats you mercifully, and if I can say it was my doing——’ I listened eagerly for more, but she stopped at those words.”

“You tried to make her go on?”

“I tried, but she only drew herself away from me again, and leaned her face and arms against the side of the boat-house. ‘Oh!’ I heard her say, with a dreadful, distracted tenderness in her voice, ‘oh! if I could only be buried with your mother! If I could only wake at her side, when the angel’s trumpet sounds, and the graves give up their dead at the resurrection!’—Marian! I trembled from head to foot—it was horrible to hear her. ‘But there is no hope of that,’ she said, moving a little, so as to look at me again, ‘no hope for a poor stranger like me. I shall not rest under the marble cross that I washed with my own hands, and made so white and pure for her sake. Oh no! oh no! God’s mercy, not man’s, will take me to her, where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest.’ She spoke those words quietly and sorrowfully, with a heavy, hopeless sigh, and then waited a little. Her face was confused and troubled, she seemed to be thinking, or trying to think. ‘What was it I said just now?’ she asked after a while. ‘When your mother is in my mind, everything else goes out of it. What was I saying? what was I saying?’ I reminded the poor creature, as kindly and delicately as I could. ‘Ah, yes, yes,’ she said, still in a vacant, perplexed manner. ‘You are helpless with your wicked husband. Yes. And I must do what I have come to do here—I must make it up to you for having been afraid to speak out at a better time.’ ‘What IS it you have to tell me?’ I asked. ‘The Secret that your cruel husband is afraid of,’ she answered. ‘I once threatened him with the Secret, and frightened him. You shall threaten him with the Secret, and frighten him too.’ Her face darkened, and a hard, angry stare fixed itself in her eyes. She began waving her hand at me in a vacant, unmeaning manner. ‘My mother knows the Secret,’ she said. ‘My mother has wasted under the Secret half her lifetime. One day, when I was grown up, she said something to ME. And the next day your husband——’ ”

“Yes! yes! Go on. What did she tell you about your husband?”

“She stopped again, Marian, at that point——”

“And said no more?”

“And listened eagerly. ‘Hush!’ she whispered, still waving her hand at me. ‘Hush!’ She moved aside out of the doorway, moved slowly and stealthily, step by step, till I lost her past the edge of the boat-house.”

“Surely you followed her?”

“Yes, my anxiety made me bold enough to rise and follow her. Just as I reached the entrance, she appeared again suddenly, round the side of the boat-house. ‘The Secret,’ I whispered to her—’wait and tell me the Secret!’ She caught hold of my arm, and looked at me with wild frightened eyes. ‘Not now,’ she said, ‘we are not alone—we are watched. Come here to-morrow

at this time—by yourself—mind—by yourself.' She pushed me roughly into the boat- house again, and I saw her no more."

"Oh, Laura, Laura, another chance lost! If I had only been near you she should not have escaped us. On which side did you lose sight of her?"

"On the left side, where the ground sinks and the wood is thickest."

"Did you run out again? did you call after her?"

"How could I? I was too terrified to move or speak."

"But when you DID move—when you came out?"

"I ran back here, to tell you what had happened."

"Did you see any one, or hear any one, in the plantation?"

"No, it seemed to be all still and quiet when I passed through it."

I waited for a moment to consider. Was this third person, supposed to have been secretly present at the interview, a reality, or the creature of Anne Catherick's excited fancy? It was impossible to determine. The one thing certain was, that we had failed again on the very brink of discovery—failed utterly and irretrievably, unless Anne Catherick kept her appointment at the boat-house for the next day.

"Are you quite sure you have told me everything that passed? Every word that was said?" I inquired.

"I think so," she answered. "My powers of memory, Marian, are not like yours. But I was so strongly impressed, so deeply interested, that nothing of any importance can possibly have escaped me."

"My dear Laura, the merest trifles are of importance where Anne Catherick is concerned. Think again. Did no chance reference escape her as to the place in which she is living at the present time?"

"None that I can remember."

"Did she not mention a companion and friend—a woman named Mrs. Clements?"

"Oh yes! yes! I forgot that. She told me Mrs. Clements wanted sadly to go with her to the lake and take care of her, and begged and prayed that she would not venture into this neighbourhood alone."

"Was that all she said about Mrs. Clements?"

"Yes, that was all."

"She told you nothing about the place in which she took refuge after leaving Todd's Corner?"

"Nothing—I am quite sure."

"Nor where she has lived since? Nor what her illness had been?"

"No, Marian, not a word. Tell me, pray tell me, what you think about it. I don't know what to think, or what to do next."

"You must do this, my love: You must carefully keep the appointment at the boat-house to-morrow. It is impossible to say what interests may not depend on your seeing that woman again. You shall not be left to yourself a second time. I will follow you at a safe distance. Nobody shall see me, but I will keep within hearing of your voice, if anything happens. Anne Catherick has escaped Walter Hartright, and has escaped you. Whatever happens, she shall not escape ME."

Laura's eyes read mine attentively.

"You believe," she said, "in this secret that my husband is afraid of? Suppose, Marian, it should only exist after all in Anne Catherick's fancy? Suppose she only wanted to see me and to speak to me, for the sake of old remembrances? Her manner was so strange—I almost doubted her. Would you trust her in other things?"

"I trust nothing, Laura, but my own observation of your husband's conduct. I judge Anne Catherick's words by his actions, and I believe there is a secret."

I said no more, and got up to leave the room Thoughts were troubling me which I might have told her if we had spoken together longer, and which it might have been dangerous for her to know. The influence of the terrible dream from which she had awakened me hung darkly and heavily over every fresh impression which the progress of her narrative produced on my mind. I felt the ominous future coming close, chilling me with an unutterable awe, forcing on me the conviction of an unseen design in the long series of complications which had now fastened round us. I thought of Hartright—as I saw him in the body when he said farewell; as I saw him in the spirit in my dream—and I too began to doubt now whether we were not advancing blindfold to an appointed and an inevitable end.

Leaving Laura to go upstairs alone, I went out to look about me in the walks near the house. The circumstances under which Anne Catherick had parted from her had made me secretly anxious to know how Count Fosco was passing the afternoon, and had rendered me secretly distrustful of the results of that solitary journey from which Sir Percival had returned but a few hours since.

After looking for them in every direction and discovering nothing, I returned to the house, and entered the different rooms on the ground floor one after another. They were all empty. I came out again into the hall, and went upstairs to return to Laura. Madame Fosco opened her door as I passed it in my way along the passage, and I stopped to see if she could inform me of the whereabouts of her husband and Sir Percival. Yes, she had seen them both from her window more than an hour since. The Count had looked up with his customary kindness, and had mentioned with his habitual attention to her in the smallest trifles, that he and his friend were going out together for a long walk.

For a long walk! They had never yet been in each other's company with that object in my experience of them. Sir Percival cared for no exercise but riding, and the Count (except when he was polite enough to be my escort) cared for no exercise at all.

When I joined Laura again, I found that she had called to mind in my absence the impending question of the signature to the deed, which, in the interest of discussing her interview with Anne Catherick, we had hitherto overlooked. Her first words when I saw her expressed her surprise at the absence of the expected summons to attend Sir Percival in the library.

"You may make your mind easy on that subject," I said. "For the present, at least, neither your resolution nor mine will be exposed to any further trial. Sir Percival has altered his plans— the business of the signature is put off."

"Put off?" Laura repeated amazedly. "Who told you so?"

"My authority is Count Fosco. I believe it is to his interference that we are indebted for your husband's sudden change of purpose."

"It seems impossible, Marian. If the object of my signing was, as we suppose, to obtain money for Sir Percival that he urgently wanted, how can the matter be put off?"

"I think, Laura, we have the means at hand of setting that doubt at rest. Have you forgotten the conversation that I heard between Sir Percival and the lawyer as they were crossing the hall?"

"No, but I don't remember——"

"I do. There were two alternatives proposed. One was to obtain your signature to the parchment. The other was to gain time by giving bills at three months. The last resource is evidently the resource now adopted, and we may fairly hope to be relieved from our share in Sir Percival's embarrassments for some time to come."

“Oh, Marian, it sounds too good to be true!”

“Does it, my love? You complimented me on my ready memory not long since, but you seem to doubt it now. I will get my journal, and you shall see if I am right or wrong.”

I went away and got the book at once.

On looking back to the entry referring to the lawyer’s visit, we found that my recollection of the two alternatives presented was accurately correct. It was almost as great a relief to my mind as to Laura’s, to find that my memory had served me, on this occasion, as faithfully as usual. In the perilous uncertainty of our present situation, it is hard to say what future interests may not depend upon the regularity of the entries in my journal, and upon the reliability of my recollection at the time when I make them.

Laura’s face and manner suggested to me that this last consideration had occurred to her as well as to myself. Anyway, it is only a trifling matter, and I am almost ashamed to put it down here in writing—it seems to set the forlornness of our situation in such a miserably vivid light. We must have little indeed to depend on, when the discovery that my memory can still be trusted to serve us is hailed as if it was the discovery of a new friend!

The first bell for dinner separated us. Just as it had done ringing, Sir Percival and the Count returned from their walk. We heard the master of the house storming at the servants for being five minutes late, and the master’s guest interposing, as usual, in the interests of propriety, patience, and peace.

* * *

The evening has come and gone. No extraordinary event has happened. But I have noticed certain peculiarities in the conduct of Sir Percival and the Count, which have sent me to my bed feeling very anxious and uneasy about Anne Catherick, and about the results which to-morrow may produce.

I know enough by this time, to be sure, that the aspect of Sir Percival which is the most false, and which, therefore, means the worst, is his polite aspect. That long walk with his friend had ended in improving his manners, especially towards his wife. To Laura’s secret surprise and to my secret alarm, he called her by her Christian name, asked if she had heard lately from her uncle. inquired when Mrs. Vesey was to receive her invitation to Blackwater, and showed her so many other little attentions that he almost recalled the days of his hateful courtship at Limmeridge House. This was a bad sign to begin with, and I thought it more ominous still that he should pretend after dinner to fall asleep in the drawing-room, and that his eyes should cunningly follow Laura and me when he thought we neither of us suspected him. I have never had any doubt that his sudden journey by himself took him to Welmingham to question Mrs. Catherick—but the experience of to-night has made me fear that the expedition was not undertaken in vain, and that he has got the information which he unquestionably left us to collect. If I knew where Anne Catherick was to be found, I would be up to-morrow with sunrise and warn her.

While the aspect under which Sir Percival presented himself to- night was unhappily but too familiar to me, the aspect under which the Count appeared was, on the other hand, entirely new in my experience of him. He permitted me, this evening, to make his acquaintance, for the first time, in the character of a Man of Sentiment—of sentiment, as I believe, really felt, not assumed for the occasion.

For instance, he was quiet and subdued—his eyes and his voice expressed a restrained sensibility. He wore (as if there was some hidden connection between his showiest finery and his

deepest feeling) the most magnificent waistcoat he has yet appeared in—it was made of pale sea-green silk, and delicately trimmed with fine silver braid. His voice sank into the tenderest inflections, his smile expressed a thoughtful, fatherly admiration, whenever he spoke to Laura or to me. He pressed his wife's hand under the table when she thanked him for trifling little attentions at dinner. He took wine with her. "Your health and happiness, my angel!" he said, with fond glistening eyes. He ate little or nothing, and sighed, and said "Good Percival!" when his friend laughed at him. After dinner, he took Laura by the hand, and asked her if she would be "so sweet as to play to him." She complied, through sheer astonishment. He sat by the piano, with his watch-chain resting in folds, like a golden serpent, on the sea-green protuberance of his waistcoat. His immense head lay languidly on one side, and he gently beat time with two of his yellow-white fingers. He highly approved of the music, and tenderly admired Laura's manner of playing—not as poor Hartright used to praise it, with an innocent enjoyment of the sweet sounds, but with a clear, cultivated, practical knowledge of the merits of the composition, in the first place, and of the merits of the player's touch in the second. As the evening closed in, he begged that the lovely dying light might not be profaned, just yet, by the appearance of the lamps. He came, with his horribly silent tread, to the distant window at which I was standing, to be out of his way and to avoid the very sight of him—he came to ask me to support his protest against the lamps. If any one of them could only have burnt him up at that moment, I would have gone down to the kitchen and fetched it myself.

"Surely you like this modest, trembling English twilight?" he said softly. "Ah! I love it. I feel my inborn admiration of all that is noble, and great, and good, purified by the breath of heaven on an evening like this. Nature has such imperishable charms, such inextinguishable tenderness for me!—I am an old, fat man—talk which would become your lips, Miss Halcombe, sounds like a derision and a mockery on mine. It is hard to be laughed at in my moments of sentiment, as if my soul was like myself, old and overgrown. Observe, dear lady, what a light is dying on the trees! Does it penetrate your heart, as it penetrates mine?"

He paused, looked at me, and repeated the famous lines of Dante on the Evening-time, with a melody and tenderness which added a charm of their own to the matchless beauty of the poetry itself.

"Bah!" he cried suddenly, as the last cadence of those noble Italian words died away on his lips; "I make an old fool of myself, and only weary you all! Let us shut up the window in our bosoms and get back to the matter-of-fact world. Percival! I sanction the admission of the lamps. Lady Glyde—Miss Halcombe— Eleanor, my good wife—which of you will indulge me with a game at dominoes?"

He addressed us all, but he looked especially at Laura.

She had learnt to feel my dread of offending him, and she accepted his proposal. It was more than I could have done at that moment. I could not have sat down at the same table with him for any consideration. His eyes seemed to reach my inmost soul through the thickening obscurity of the twilight. His voice trembled along every nerve in my body, and turned me hot and cold alternately. The mystery and terror of my dream, which had haunted me at intervals all through the evening, now oppressed my mind with an unendurable foreboding and an unutterable awe. I saw the white tomb again, and the veiled woman rising out of it by Hartright's side. The thought of Laura welled up like a spring in the depths of my heart, and filled it with waters of bitterness, never, never known to it before. I caught her by the hand as she passed me on her way to the table, and kissed her as if that night was to part us for ever. While they were all gazing at me in

astonishment, I ran out through the low window which was open before me to the ground—ran out to hide from them in the darkness, to hide even from myself.

We separated that evening later than usual. Towards mid-night the summer silence was broken by the shuddering of a low, melancholy wind among the trees. We all felt the sudden chill in the atmosphere, but the Count was the first to notice the stealthy rising of the wind. He stopped while he was lighting my candle for me, and held up his hand warningly—

"Listen!" he said. "There will be a change to-morrow."

VII

June 19th.—The events of yesterday warned me to be ready, sooner or later, to meet the worst. To-day is not yet at an end, and the worst has come.

Judging by the closest calculation of time that Laura and I could make, we arrived at the conclusion that Anne Catherick must have appeared at the boat-house at half-past two o'clock on the afternoon of yesterday. I accordingly arranged that Laura should just show herself at the luncheon-table to-day, and should then slip out at the first opportunity, leaving me behind to preserve appearances, and to follow her as soon as I could safely do so. This mode of proceeding, if no obstacles occurred to thwart us, would enable her to be at the boat-house before half-past two, and (when I left the table, in my turn) would take me to a safe position in the plantation before three.

The change in the weather, which last night's wind warned us to expect, came with the morning. It was raining heavily when I got up, and it continued to rain until twelve o'clock—when the clouds dispersed, the blue sky appeared, and the sun shone again with the bright promise of a fine afternoon.

My anxiety to know how Sir Percival and the Count would occupy the early part of the day was by no means set at rest, so far as Sir Percival was concerned, by his leaving us immediately after breakfast, and going out by himself, in spite of the rain. He neither told us where he was going nor when we might expect him back. We saw him pass the breakfast-room window hastily, with his high boots and his waterproof coat on—and that was all.

The Count passed the morning quietly indoors, some part of it in the library, some part in the drawing-room, playing odds and ends of music on the piano, and humming to himself. Judging by appearances, the sentimental side of his character was persistently inclined to betray itself still. He was silent and sensitive, and ready to sigh and languish ponderously (as only fat men CAN sigh and languish) on the smallest provocation.

Luncheon-time came and Sir Percival did not return. The Count took his friend's place at the table, plaintively devoured the greater part of a fruit tart, submerged under a whole jugful of cream, and explained the full merit of the achievement to us as soon as he had done. "A taste for sweets," he said in his softest tones and his tenderest manner, "is the innocent taste of women and children. I love to share it with them—it is another bond, dear ladies, between you and me."

Laura left the table in ten minutes' time. I was sorely tempted to accompany her. But if we had both gone out together we must have excited suspicion, and worse still, if we allowed Anne Catherick to see Laura, accompanied by a second person who was a stranger to her, we should in all probability forfeit her confidence from that moment, never to regain it again.

I waited, therefore, as patiently as I could, until the servant came in to clear the table. When I quitted the room, there were no signs, in the house or out of it, of Sir Percival's return. I left the Count with a piece of sugar between his lips, and the vicious cockatoo scrambling up his waistcoat to get at it, while Madame Fosco, sitting opposite to her husband, watched the proceedings of his bird and himself as attentively as if she had never seen anything of the sort before in her life. On my way to the plantation I kept carefully beyond the range of view from the luncheon-room window. Nobody saw me and nobody followed me. It was then a quarter to three o'clock by my watch.

Once among the trees I walked rapidly, until I had advanced more than half-way through the plantation. At that point I slackened my pace and proceeded cautiously, but I saw no one, and heard no voices. By little and little I came within view of the back of the boat-house—stopped and listened—then went on, till I was close behind it, and must have heard any persons who were talking inside. Still the silence was unbroken—still far and near no sign of a living creature appeared anywhere.

After skirting round by the back of the building, first on one side and then on the other, and making no discoveries, I ventured in front of it, and fairly looked in. The place was empty.

I called, "Laura!"—at first softly, then louder and louder. No one answered and no one appeared. For all that I could see and hear, the only human creature in the neighbourhood of the lake and the plantation was myself.

My heart began to beat violently, but I kept my resolution, and searched, first the boat-house and then the ground in front of it, for any signs which might show me whether Laura had really reached the place or not. No mark of her presence appeared inside the building, but I found traces of her outside it, in footsteps on the sand.

I detected the footsteps of two persons—large footsteps like a man's, and small footsteps, which, by putting my own feet into them and testing their size in that manner, I felt certain were Laura's. The ground was confusedly marked in this way just before the boat-house. Close against one side of it, under shelter of the projecting roof, I discovered a little hole in the sand—a hole artificially made, beyond a doubt. I just noticed it, and then turned away immediately to trace the footsteps as far as I could, and to follow the direction in which they might lead me.

They led me, starting from the left-hand side of the boat-house, along the edge of the trees, a distance, I should think, of between two and three hundred yards, and then the sandy ground showed no further trace of them. Feeling that the persons whose course I was tracking must necessarily have entered the plantation at this point, I entered it too. At first I could find no path, but I discovered one afterwards, just faintly traced among the trees, and followed it. It took me, for some distance, in the direction of the village, until I stopped at a point where another foot-track crossed it. The brambles grew thickly on either side of this second path. I stood looking down it, uncertain which way to take next, and while I looked I saw on one thorny branch some fragments of fringe from a woman's shawl. A closer examination of the fringe satisfied me that it had been torn from a shawl of Laura's, and I instantly followed the second path. It brought me out at last, to my great relief, at the back of the house. I say to my great relief, because I inferred that Laura must, for some unknown reason, have returned before me by this roundabout way. I went in by the court-yard and the offices. The first person whom I met in crossing the servants' hall was Mrs. Michelson, the housekeeper.

"Do you know," I asked, "whether Lady Glyde has come in from her walk or not?"

"My lady came in a little while ago with Sir Percival," answered the housekeeper. "I am afraid, Miss Halcombe, something very distressing has happened."

My heart sank within me. “You don’t mean an accident?” I said faintly.

“No, no—thank God, no accident. But my lady ran up-stairs to her own room in tears, and Sir Percival has ordered me to give Fanny warning to leave in an hour’s time.”

Fanny was Laura’s maid—a good affectionate girl who had been with her for years—the only person in the house whose fidelity and devotion we could both depend upon.

“Where is Fanny?” I inquired.

“In my room, Miss Halcombe. The young woman is quite overcome, and I told her to sit down and try to recover herself.”

I went to Mrs. Michelson’s room, and found Fanny in a corner, with her box by her side, crying bitterly.

She could give me no explanation whatever of her sudden dismissal. Sir Percival had ordered that she should have a month’s wages, in place of a month’s warning, and go. No reason had been assigned— no objection had been made to her conduct. She had been forbidden to appeal to her mistress, forbidden even to see her for a moment to say good-bye. She was to go without explanations or farewells, and to go at once.

After soothing the poor girl by a few friendly words, I asked where she proposed to sleep that night. She replied that she thought of going to the little inn in the village, the landlady of which was a respectable woman, known to the servants at Blackwater Park. The next morning, by leaving early, she might get back to her friends in Cumberland without stopping in London, where she was a total stranger.

I felt directly that Fanny’s departure offered us a safe means of communication with London and with Limmeridge House, of which it might be very important to avail ourselves. Accordingly, I told her that she might expect to hear from her mistress or from me in the course of the evening, and that she might depend on our both doing all that lay in our power to help her, under the trial of leaving us for the present. Those words said, I shook hands with her and went upstairs.

The door which led to Laura’s room was the door of an ante-chamber opening on to the passage. When I tried it, it was bolted on the inside.

I knocked, and the door was opened by the same heavy, over-grown housemaid whose lumpish insensibility had tried my patience so severely on the day when I found the wounded dog.

I had, since that time, discovered that her name was Margaret Porcher, and that she was the most awkward, slatternly, and obstinate servant in the house.

On opening the door she instantly stepped out to the threshold, and stood grinning at me in stolid silence.

“Why do you stand there?” I said. “Don’t you see that I want to come in?”

“Ah, but you mustn’t come in,” was the answer, with another and a broader grin still.

“How dare you talk to me in that way? Stand back instantly!”

She stretched out a great red hand and arm on each side of her, so as to bar the doorway, and slowly nodded her addle head at me.

“Master’s orders,” she said, and nodded again.

I had need of all my self-control to warn me against contesting the matter with HER, and to remind me that the next words I had to say must be addressed to her master. I turned my back on her, and instantly went downstairs to find him. My resolution to keep my temper under all the irritations that Sir Percival could offer was, by this time, as completely forgotten—I say so to my shame— as if I had never made it. It did me good, after all I had suffered and suppressed in that house—it actually did me good to feel how angry I was.

The drawing-room and the breakfast-room were both empty. I went on to the library, and there I found Sir Percival, the Count, and Madame Fosco. They were all three standing up, close together, and Sir Percival had a little slip of paper in his hand. As I opened the door I heard the Count say to him, "No—a thousand times over, no."

I walked straight up to him, and looked him full in the face.

"Am I to understand, Sir Percival, that your wife's room is a prison, and that your housemaid is the gaoler who keeps it?" I asked.

"Yes, that is what you are to understand," he answered. "Take care my gaoler hasn't got double duty to do—take care your room is not a prison too."

"Take YOU care how you treat your wife, and how you threaten ME," I broke out in the heat of my anger. "There are laws in England to protect women from cruelty and outrage. If you hurt a hair of Laura's head, if you dare to interfere with my freedom, come what may, to those laws I will appeal."

Instead of answering me he turned round to the Count.

"What did I tell you?" he asked. "What do you say now?"

"What I said before," replied the Count—"No."

Even in the vehemence of my anger I felt his calm, cold, grey eyes on my face. They turned away from me as soon as he had spoken, and looked significantly at his wife. Madame Fosco immediately moved close to my side, and in that position addressed Sir Percival before either of us could speak again.

"Favour me with your attention for one moment," she said, in her clear icily-suppressed tones. "I have to thank you, Sir Percival, for your hospitality, and to decline taking advantage of it any longer. I remain in no house in which ladies are treated as your wife and Miss Halcombe have been treated here to-day!"

Sir Percival drew back a step, and stared at her in dead silence. The declaration he had just heard—a declaration which he well knew, as I well knew, Madame Fosco would not have ventured to make without her husband's permission—seemed to petrify him with surprise. The Count stood by, and looked at his wife with the most enthusiastic admiration.

"She is sublime!" he said to himself. He approached her while he spoke, and drew her hand through his arm. "I am at your service, Eleanor," he went on, with a quiet dignity that I had never noticed in him before. "And at Miss Halcombe's service, if she will honour me by accepting all the assistance I can offer her."

"Damn it! what do you mean?" cried Sir Percival, as the Count quietly moved away with his wife to the door.

"At other times I mean what I say, but at this time I mean what my wife says," replied the impenetrable Italian. "We have changed places, Percival, for once, and Madame Fosco's opinion is—mine."

Sir Percival crumpled up the paper in his hand, and pushing past the Count, with another oath, stood between him and the door.

"Have your own way," he said, with baffled rage in his low, half- whispering tones. "Have your own way—and see what comes of it." With those words he left the room.

Madame Fosco glanced inquiringly at her husband. "He has gone away very suddenly," she said. "What does it mean?"

"It means that you and I together have brought the worst-tempered man in all England to his senses," answered the Count. "It means, Miss Halcombe, that Lady Glyde is relieved from a

gross indignity, and you from the repetition of an unpardonable insult. Suffer me to express my admiration of your conduct and your courage at a very trying moment."

"Sincere admiration," suggested Madame Fosco.

"Sincere admiration," echoed the Count.

I had no longer the strength of my first angry resistance to outrage and injury to support me. My heart-sick anxiety to see Laura, my sense of my own helpless ignorance of what had happened at the boat-house, pressed on me with an intolerable weight. I tried to keep up appearances by speaking to the Count and his wife in the tone which they had chosen to adopt in speaking to me, but the words failed on my lips—my breath came short and thick—my eyes looked longingly, in silence, at the door. The Count, understanding my anxiety, opened it, went out, and pulled it to after him. At the same time Sir Percival's heavy step descended the stairs. I heard them whispering together outside, while Madame Fosco was assuring me, in her calmest and most conventional manner, that she rejoiced, for all our sakes, that Sir Percival's conduct had not obliged her husband and herself to leave Blackwater Park. Before she had done speaking the whispering ceased, the door opened, and the Count looked in.

"Miss Halcombe," he said, "I am happy to inform you that Lady Glyde is mistress again in her own house. I thought it might be more agreeable to you to hear of this change for the better from me than from Sir Percival, and I have therefore expressly returned to mention it."

"Admirable delicacy!" said Madame Fosco, paying back her husband's tribute of admiration with the Count's own coin, in the Count's own manner. He smiled and bowed as if he had received a formal compliment from a polite stranger, and drew back to let me pass out first.

Sir Percival was standing in the hall. As I hurried to the stairs I heard him call impatiently to the Count to come out of the library.

"What are you waiting there for?" he said. "I want to speak to you."

"And I want to think a little by myself," replied the other. "Wait till later, Percival, wait till later."

Neither he nor his friend said any more. I gained the top of the stairs and ran along the passage. In my haste and my agitation I left the door of the ante-chamber open, but I closed the door of the bedroom the moment I was inside it.

Laura was sitting alone at the far end of the room, her arms resting wearily on a table, and her face hidden in her hands. She started up with a cry of delight when she saw me.

"How did you get here?" she asked. "Who gave you leave? Not Sir Percival?"

In my overpowering anxiety to hear what she had to tell me, I could not answer her—I could only put questions on my side. Laura's eagerness to know what had passed downstairs proved, however, too strong to be resisted. She persistently repeated her inquiries.

"The Count, of course," I answered impatiently. "Whose influence in the house——"

She stopped me with a gesture of disgust.

"Don't speak of him," she cried. "The Count is the vilest creature breathing! The Count is a miserable Spy——!"

Before we could either of us say another word we were alarmed by a soft knocking at the door of the bedroom.

I had not yet sat down, and I went first to see who it was. When I opened the door Madame Fosco confronted me with my handkerchief in her hand.

"You dropped this downstairs, Miss Halcombe," she said, "and I thought I could bring it to you, as I was passing by to my own room."

Her face, naturally pale, had turned to such a ghastly whiteness that I started at the sight of it. Her hands, so sure and steady at all other times, trembled violently, and her eyes looked wolfishly past me through the open door, and fixed on Laura.

She had been listening before she knocked! I saw it in her white face, I saw it in her trembling hands, I saw it in her look at Laura.

After waiting an instant she turned from me in silence, and slowly walked away.

I closed the door again. "Oh, Laura! Laura! We shall both rue the day when you called the Count a Spy!"

"You would have called him so yourself, Marian, if you had known what I know. Anne Catherick was right. There was a third person watching us in the plantation yesterday, and that third person—-"

"Are you sure it was the Count?"

"I am absolutely certain. He was Sir Percival's spy—he was Sir Percival's informer—he set Sir Percival watching and waiting, all the morning through, for Anne Catherick and for me."

"Is Anne found? Did you see her at the lake?"

"No. She has saved herself by keeping away from the place. When I got to the boat-house no one was there."

"Yes? Yes?"

"I went in and sat waiting for a few minutes. But my restlessness made me get up again, to walk about a little. As I passed out I saw some marks on the sand, close under the front of the boat- house. I stooped down to examine them, and discovered a word written in large letters on the sand. The word was—LOOK.

"And you scraped away the sand, and dug a hollow place in it?"

"How do you know that, Marian?"

"I saw the hollow place myself when I followed you to the boat- house. Go on—go on!"

"Yes, I scraped away the sand on the surface, and in a little while I came to a strip of paper hidden beneath, which had writing on it. The writing was signed with Anne Catherick's initials.

"Where is it?"

"Sir Percival has taken it from me."

"Can you remember what the writing was? Do you think you can repeat it to me?"

"In substance I can, Marian. It was very short. You would have remembered it, word for word."

"Try to tell me what the substance was before we go any further."

She complied. I write the lines down here exactly as she repeated them to me. They ran thus:—

"I was seen with you, yesterday, by a tall, stout old man, and had to run to save myself. He was not quick enough on his feet to follow me, and he lost me among the trees. I dare not risk coming back here to-day at the same time. I write this, and hide it in the sand, at six in the morning, to tell you so. When we speak next of your wicked husband's Secret we must speak safely, or not at all. Try to have patience. I promise you shall see me again and that soon.—A. C."

The reference to the "tall, stout old man" (the terms of which Laura was certain that she had repeated to me correctly) left no doubt as to who the intruder had been. I called to mind that I had told Sir Percival, in the Count's presence the day before, that Laura had gone to the boat-house to look for her brooch. In all probability he had followed her there, in his officious way, to relieve her mind about the matter of the signature, immediately after he had mentioned the

change in Sir Percival's plans to me in the drawing-room. In this case he could only have got to the neighbourhood of the boat-house at the very moment when Anne Catherick discovered him. The suspiciously hurried manner in which she parted from Laura had no doubt prompted his useless attempt to follow her. Of the conversation which had previously taken place between them he could have heard nothing. The distance between the house and the lake, and the time at which he left me in the drawing-room, as compared with the time at which Laura and Anne Catherick had been speaking together, proved that fact to us at any rate, beyond a doubt.

Having arrived at something like a conclusion so far, my next great interest was to know what discoveries Sir Percival had made after Count Fosco had given him his information.

"How came you to lose possession of the letter?" I asked. "What did you do with it when you found it in the sand?"

"After reading it once through," she replied, "I took it into the boat-house with me to sit down and look over it a second time. While I was reading a shadow fell across the paper. I looked up, and saw Sir Percival standing in the doorway watching me."

"Did you try to hide the letter?"

"I tried, but he stopped me. 'You needn't trouble to hide that,' he said. 'I happen to have read it.' I could only look at him helplessly—I could say nothing. 'You understand?' he went on; 'I have read it. I dug it up out of the sand two hours since, and buried it again, and wrote the word above it again, and left it ready to your hands. You can't lie yourself out of the scrape now. You saw Anne Catherick in secret yesterday, and you have got her letter in your hand at this moment. I have not caught HER yet, but I have caught YOU. Give me the letter.' He stepped close up to me—I was alone with him, Marian—what could I do?—I gave him the letter."

"What did he say when you gave it to him?"

"At first he said nothing. He took me by the arm, and led me out of the boat-house, and looked about him on all sides, as if he was afraid of our being seen or heard. Then he clasped his hand fast round my arm, and whispered to me, 'What did Anne Catherick say to you yesterday? I insist on hearing every word, from first to last.' "

"Did you tell him?"

"I was alone with him, Marian—his cruel hand was bruising my arm— what could I do?"

"Is the mark on your arm still? Let me see it."

"Why do you want to see it?"

"I want to see it, Laura, because our endurance must end, and our resistance must begin to-day. That mark is a weapon to strike him with. Let me see it now—I may have to swear to it at some future time."

"Oh, Marian, don't look so—don't talk so! It doesn't hurt me now!" "Let me see it!"

She showed me the marks. I was past grieving over them, past crying over them, past shuddering over them. They say we are either better than men, or worse. If the temptation that has fallen in some women's way, and made them worse, had fallen in mine at that moment Thank God! my face betrayed nothing that his wife could read. The gentle, innocent, affectionate creature thought I was frightened for her and sorry for her, and thought no more.

"Don't think too seriously of it, Marian," she said simply, as she pulled her sleeve down again. "It doesn't hurt me now."

"I will try to think quietly of it, my love, for your sake.—Well! well! And you told him all that Anne Catherick had said to you— all that you told me?"

"Yes, all. He insisted on it—I was alone with him—I could conceal nothing."

"Did he say anything when you had done?"

"He looked at me, and laughed to himself in a mocking, bitter way. 'I mean to have the rest out of you,' he said, 'do you hear?—the rest.' I declared to him solemnly that I had told him everything I knew. 'Not you,' he answered, 'you know more than you choose to tell. Won't you tell it? You shall! I'll wring it out of you at home if I can't wring it out of you here.' He led me away by a strange path through the plantation—a path where there was no hope of our meeting you—and he spoke no more till we came within sight of the house. Then he stopped again, and said, 'Will you take a second chance, if I give it to you? Will you think better of it, and tell me the rest?' I could only repeat the same words I had spoken before. He cursed my obstinacy, and went on, and took me with him to the house. 'You can't deceive me,' he said, 'you know more than you choose to tell. I'll have your secret out of you, and I'll have it out of that sister of yours as well. There shall be no more plotting and whispering between you. Neither you nor she shall see each other again till you have confessed the truth. I'll have you watched morning, noon, and night, till you confess the truth.' He was deaf to everything I could say. He took me straight upstairs into my own room. Fanny was sitting there, doing some work for me, and he instantly ordered her out. 'I'll take good care YOU'RE not mixed up in the conspiracy,' he said. 'You shall leave this house to-day. If your mistress wants a maid, she shall have one of my choosing.' He pushed me into the room, and locked the door on me. He set that senseless woman to watch me outside, Marian! He looked and spoke like a madman. You may hardly understand it—he did indeed."

"I do understand it, Laura. He is mad—mad with the terrors of a guilty conscience. Every word you have said makes me positively certain that when Anne Catherick left you yesterday you were on the eve of discovering a secret which might have been your vile husband's ruin, and he thinks you HAVE discovered it. Nothing you can say or do will quiet that guilty distrust, and convince his false nature of your truth. I don't say this, my love, to alarm you. I say it to open your eyes to your position, and to convince you of the urgent necessity of letting me act, as I best can, for your protection while the chance is our own. Count Fosco's interference has secured me access to you to-day, but he may withdraw that interference to-morrow. Sir Percival has already dismissed Fanny because she is a quick-witted girl, and devotedly attached to you, and has chosen a woman to take her place who cares nothing for your interests, and whose dull intelligence lowers her to the level of the watch-dog in the yard. It is impossible to say what violent measures he may take next, unless we make the most of our opportunities while we have them."

"What can we do, Marian? Oh, if we could only leave this house, never to see it again!"

"Listen to me, my love, and try to think that you are not quite helpless so long as I am here with you."

"I will think so—I do think so. Don't altogether forget poor Fanny in thinking of me. She wants help and comfort too."

"I will not forget her. I saw her before I came up here, and I have arranged to communicate with her to-night. Letters are not safe in the post-bag at Blackwater Park, and I shall have two to write to-day, in your interests, which must pass through no hands but Fanny's."

"What letters?"

"I mean to write first, Laura, to Mr. Gilmore's partner, who has offered to help us in any fresh emergency. Little as I know of the law, I am certain that it can protect a woman from such treatment as that ruffian has inflicted on you to-day. I will go into no details about Anne Catherick, because I have no certain information to give. But the lawyer shall know of those

bruises on your arm, and of the violence offered to you in this room—he shall, before I rest to-night!"

"But think of the exposure, Marian!"

"I am calculating on the exposure. Sir Percival has more to dread from it than you have. The prospect of an exposure may bring him to terms when nothing else will."

I rose as I spoke, but Laura entreated me not to leave her. "You will drive him to desperation," she said, "and increase our dangers tenfold."

I felt the truth—the disheartening truth—of those words. But I could not bring myself plainly to acknowledge it to her. In our dreadful position there was no help and no hope for us but in risking the worst. I said so in guarded terms. She sighed bitterly, but did not contest the matter. She only asked about the second letter that I had proposed writing. To whom was it to be addressed?

"To Mr. Fairlie," I said. "Your uncle is your nearest male relative, and the head of the family. He must and shall interfere."

Laura shook her head sorrowfully.

"Yes, yes," I went on, "your uncle is a weak, selfish, worldly man, I know, but he is not Sir Percival Glyde, and he has no such friend about him as Count Fosco. I expect nothing from his kindness or his tenderness of feeling towards you or towards me, but he will do anything to pamper his own indolence, and to secure his own quiet. Let me only persuade him that his interference at this moment will save him inevitable trouble and wretchedness and responsibility hereafter, and he will bestir himself for his own sake. I know how to deal with him, Laura—I have had some practice."

"If you could only prevail on him to let me go back to Limmeridge for a little while and stay there quietly with you, Marian, I could be almost as happy again as I was before I was married!"

Those words set me thinking in a new direction. Would it be possible to place Sir Percival between the two alternatives of either exposing himself to the scandal of legal interference on his wife's behalf, or of allowing her to be quietly separated from him for a time under pretext of a visit to her uncle's house? And could he, in that case, be reckoned on as likely to accept the last resource? It was doubtful—more than doubtful. And yet, hopeless as the experiment seemed, surely it was worth trying. I resolved to try it in sheer despair of knowing what better to do.

"Your uncle shall know the wish you have just expressed," I said, "and I will ask the lawyer's advice on the subject as well. Good may come of it—and will come of it, I hope."

Saying that I rose again, and again Laura tried to make me resume my seat.

"Don't leave me," she said uneasily. "My desk is on that table. You can write here."

It tried me to the quick to refuse her, even in her own interests. But we had been too long shut up alone together already. Our chance of seeing each other again might entirely depend on our not exciting any fresh suspicions. It was full time to show myself, quietly and unconcernedly, among the wretches who were at that very moment, perhaps, thinking of us and talking of us downstairs. I explained the miserable necessity to Laura, and prevailed on her to recognise it as I did.

"I will come back again, love, in an hour or less," I said. "The worst is over for to-day. Keep yourself quiet and fear nothing."

"Is the key in the door, Marian? Can I lock it on the inside?"

"Yes, here is the key. Lock the door, and open it to nobody until I come upstairs again."

I kissed her and left her. It was a relief to me as I walked away to hear the key turned in the lock, and to know that the door was at her own command.

VIII

June 19th.—I had only got as far as the top of the stairs when the locking of Laura's door suggested to me the precaution of also locking my own door, and keeping the key safely about me while I was out of the room. My journal was already secured with other papers in the table drawer, but my writing materials were left out. These included a seal bearing the common device of two doves drinking out of the same cup, and some sheets of blotting-paper, which had the impression on them of the closing lines of my writing in these pages traced during the past night. Distorted by the suspicion which had now become a part of myself, even such trifles as these looked too dangerous to be trusted without a guard—even the locked table drawer seemed to be not sufficiently protected in my absence until the means of access to it had been carefully secured as well.

I found no appearance of any one having entered the room while I had been talking with Laura. My writing materials (which I had given the servant instructions never to meddle with) were scattered over the table much as usual. The only circumstance in connection with them that at all struck me was that the seal lay tidily in the tray with the pencils and the wax. It was not in my careless habits (I am sorry to say) to put it there, neither did I remember putting it there. But as I could not call to mind, on the other hand, where else I had thrown it down, and as I was also doubtful whether I might not for once have laid it mechanically in the right place, I abstained from adding to the perplexity with which the day's events had filled my mind by troubling it afresh about a trifle. I locked the door, put the key in my pocket, and went downstairs.

Madame Fosco was alone in the hall looking at the weather-glass.

"Still falling," she said. "I am afraid we must expect more rain."

Her face was composed again to its customary expression and its customary colour. But the hand with which she pointed to the dial of the weather-glass still trembled.

Could she have told her husband already that she had overheard Laura reviling him, in my company, as a "spy?" My strong suspicion that she must have told him, my irresistible dread (all the more overpowering from its very vagueness) of the consequences which might follow, my fixed conviction, derived from various little self-betrayals which women notice in each other, that Madame Fosco, in spite of her well-assumed external civility, had not forgiven her niece for innocently standing between her and the legacy of ten thousand pounds—all rushed upon my mind together, all impelled me to speak in the vain hope of using my own influence and my own powers of persuasion for the atonement of Laura's offence.

"May I trust to your kindness to excuse me, Madame Fosco, if I venture to speak to you on an exceedingly painful subject?"

She crossed her hands in front of her and bowed her head solemnly, without uttering a word, and without taking her eyes off mine for a moment.

"When you were so good as to bring me back my handkerchief," I went on, "I am very, very much afraid you must have accidentally heard Laura say something which I am unwilling to repeat, and which I will not attempt to defend. I will only venture to hope that you have not thought it of sufficient importance to be mentioned to the Count?"

"I think it of no importance whatever," said Madame Fosco sharply and suddenly. "But," she added, resuming her icy manner in a moment, "I have no secrets from my husband even in

trifles. When he noticed just now that I looked distressed, it was my painful duty to tell him why I was distressed, and I frankly acknowledge to you, Miss Halcombe, that I HAVE told him."

I was prepared to hear it, and yet she turned me cold all over when she said those words.

"Let me earnestly entreat you, Madame Fosco—let me earnestly entreat the Count—to make some allowances for the sad position in which my sister is placed. She spoke while she was smarting under the insult and injustice inflicted on her by her husband, and she was not herself when she said those rash words. May I hope that they will be considerately and generously forgiven?"

"Most assuredly," said the Count's quiet voice behind me. He had stolen on us with his noiseless tread and his book in his hand from the library.

"When Lady Glyde said those hasty words," he went on, "she did me an injustice which I lament—and forgive. Let us never return to the subject, Miss Halcombe; let us all comfortably combine to forget it from this moment."

"You are very kind," I said, "you relieve me inexpressibly "

I tried to continue, but his eyes were on me; his deadly smile that hides everything was set, hard, and unwavering on his broad, smooth face. My distrust of his unfathomable falseness, my sense of my own degradation in stooping to conciliate his wife and himself, so disturbed and confused me, that the next words failed on my lips, and I stood there in silence.

"I beg you on my knees to say no more, Miss Halcombe—I am truly shocked that you should have thought it necessary to say so much." With that polite speech he took my hand—oh, how I despise myself! oh, how little comfort there is even in knowing that I submitted to it for Laura's sake!—he took my hand and put it to his poisonous lips. Never did I know all my horror of him till then. That innocent familiarity turned my blood as if it had been the vilest insult that a man could offer me. Yet I hid my disgust from him—I tried to smile—I, who once mercilessly despised deceit in other women, was as false as the worst of them, as false as the Judas whose lips had touched my hand.

I could not have maintained my degrading self-control—it is all that redeems me in my own estimation to know that I could not—if he had still continued to keep his eyes on my face. His wife's tigerish jealousy came to my rescue and forced his attention away from me the moment he possessed himself of my hand. Her cold blue eyes caught light, her dull white cheeks flushed into bright colour, she looked years younger than her age in an instant.

"Count!" she said. "Your foreign forms of politeness are not understood by Englishwomen."

"Pardon me, my angel! The best and dearest Englishwoman in the world understands them." With those words he dropped my hand and quietly raised his wife's hand to his lips in place of it.

I ran back up the stairs to take refuge in my own room. If there had been time to think, my thoughts, when I was alone again, would have caused me bitter suffering. But there was no time to think. Happily for the preservation of my calmness and my courage there was time for nothing but action.

The letters to the lawyer and to Mr. Fairlie were still to be written, and I sat down at once without a moment's hesitation to devote myself to them.

There was no multitude of resources to perplex me—there was absolutely no one to depend on, in the first instance, but myself. Sir Percival had neither friends nor relatives in the neighbourhood whose intercession I could attempt to employ. He was on the coldest terms—in some cases on the worst terms with the families of his own rank and station who lived near him. We two women had neither father nor brother to come to the house and take our parts. There was no choice but to write those two doubtful letters, or to put Laura in the wrong and myself in the

wrong, and to make all peaceable negotiation in the future impossible by secretly escaping from Blackwater Park. Nothing but the most imminent personal peril could justify our taking that second course. The letters must be tried first, and I wrote them.

I said nothing to the lawyer about Anne Catherick, because (as I had already hinted to Laura) that topic was connected with a mystery which we could not yet explain, and which it would therefore be useless to write about to a professional man. I left my correspondent to attribute Sir Percival's disgraceful conduct, if he pleased, to fresh disputes about money matters, and simply consulted him on the possibility of taking legal proceedings for Laura's protection in the event of her husband's refusal to allow her to leave Blackwater Park for a time and return with me to Limmeridge. I referred him to Mr. Fairlie for the details of this last arrangement—I assured him that I wrote with Laura's authority—and I ended by entreating him to act in her name to the utmost extent of his power and with the least possible loss of time.

The letter to Mr. Fairlie occupied me next. I appealed to him on the terms which I had mentioned to Laura as the most likely to make him bestir himself; I enclosed a copy of my letter to the lawyer to show him how serious the case was, and I represented our removal to Limmeridge as the only compromise which would prevent the danger and distress of Laura's present position from inevitably affecting her uncle as well as herself at no very distant time.

When I had done, and had sealed and directed the two envelopes, I went back with the letters to Laura's room, to show her that they were written.

"Has anybody disturbed you?" I asked, when she opened the door to me.

"Nobody has knocked," she replied. "But I heard some one in the outer room."

"Was it a man or a woman?"

"A woman. I heard the rustling of her gown."

"A rustling like silk?"

"Yes, like silk."

Madame Fosco had evidently been watching outside. The mischief she might do by herself was little to be feared. But the mischief she might do, as a willing instrument in her husband's hands, was too formidable to be overlooked.

"What became of the rustling of the gown when you no longer heard it in the ante-room?" I inquired. "Did you hear it go past your wall, along the passage?"

"Yes. I kept still and listened, and just heard it."

"Which way did it go?"

"Towards your room."

I considered again. The sound had not caught my ears. But I was then deeply absorbed in my letters, and I write with a heavy hand and a quill pen, scraping and scratching noisily over the paper. It was more likely that Madame Fosco would hear the scraping of my pen than that I should hear the rustling of her dress. Another reason (if I had wanted one) for not trusting my letters to the post-bag in the hall.

Laura saw me thinking. "More difficulties!" she said wearily; "more difficulties and more dangers!"

"No dangers," I replied. "Some little difficulty, perhaps. I am thinking of the safest way of putting my two letters into Fanny's hands."

"You have really written them, then? Oh, Marian, run no risks— pray, pray run no risks!"

"No, no—no fear. Let me see—what o'clock is it now?"

It was a quarter to six. There would be time for me to get to the village inn, and to come back again before dinner. If I waited till the evening I might find no second opportunity of safely leaving the house.

"Keep the key turned in the lock. Laura," I said, "and don't be afraid about me. If you hear any inquiries made, call through the door, and say that I am gone out for a walk."

"When shall you be back?"

"Before dinner, without fail. Courage, my love. By this time to- morrow you will have a clear-headed, trustworthy man acting for your good. Mr. Gilmore's partner is our next best friend to Mr. Gilmore himself."

A moment's reflection, as soon as I was alone, convinced me that I had better not appear in my walking-dress until I had first discovered what was going on in the lower part of the house. I had not ascertained yet whether Sir Percival was indoors or out.

The singing of the canaries in the library, and the smell of tobacco-smoke that came through the door, which was not closed, told me at once where the Count was. I looked over my shoulder as I passed the doorway, and saw to my surprise that he was exhibiting the docility of the birds in his most engagingly polite manner to the housekeeper. He must have specially invited her to see them—for she would never have thought of going into the library of her own accord. The man's slightest actions had a purpose of some kind at the bottom of every one of them. What could be his purpose here?

It was no time then to inquire into his motives. I looked about for Madame Fosco next, and found her following her favourite circle round and round the fish-pond.

I was a little doubtful how she would meet me, after the outbreak of jealousy of which I had been the cause so short a time since. But her husband had tamed her in the interval, and she now spoke to me with the same civility as usual. My only object in addressing myself to her was to ascertain if she knew what had become of Sir Percival. I contrived to refer to him indirectly, and after a little fencing on either side she at last mentioned that he had gone out.

"Which of the horses has he taken?" I asked carelessly.

"None of them," she replied. "He went away two hours since on foot. As I understood it, his object was to make fresh inquiries about the woman named Anne Catherick. He appears to be unreasonably anxious about tracing her. Do you happen to know if she is dangerously mad, Miss Halcombe?"

"I do not, Countess."

"Are you going in?"

"Yes, I think so. I suppose it will soon be time to dress for dinner."

We entered the house together. Madame Fosco strolled into the library, and closed the door. I went at once to fetch my hat and shawl. Every moment was of importance, if I was to get to Fanny at the inn and be back before dinner.

When I crossed the hall again no one was there, and the singing of the birds in the library had ceased. I could not stop to make any fresh investigations. I could only assure myself that the way was clear, and then leave the house with the two letters safe in my pocket.

On my way to the village I prepared myself for the possibility of meeting Sir Percival. As long as I had him to deal with alone I felt certain of not losing my presence of mind. Any woman who is sure of her own wits is a match at any time for a man who is not sure of his own temper. I had no such fear of Sir Percival as I had of the Count. Instead of fluttering, it had composed me, to hear of the errand on which he had gone out. While the tracing of Anne Catherick was the great anxiety that occupied him, Laura and I might hope for some cessation of any active persecution

at his hands. For our sakes now, as well as for Anne's, I hoped and prayed fervently that she might still escape him.

I walked on as briskly as the heat would let me till I reached the cross-road which led to the village, looking back from time to time to make sure that I was not followed by any one.

Nothing was behind me all the way but an empty country waggon. The noise made by the lumbering wheels annoyed me, and when I found that the waggon took the road to the village, as well as myself, I stopped to let it go by and pass out of hearing. As I looked toward it, more attentively than before, I thought I detected at intervals the feet of a man walking close behind it, the carter being in front, by the side of his horses. The part of the cross-road which I had just passed over was so narrow that the waggon coming after me brushed the trees and thickets on either side, and I had to wait until it went by before I could test the correctness of my impression. Apparently that impression was wrong, for when the waggon had passed me the road behind it was quite clear.

I reached the inn without meeting Sir Percival, and without noticing anything more, and was glad to find that the landlady had received Fanny with all possible kindness. The girl had a little parlour to sit in, away from the noise of the taproom, and a clean bedchamber at the top of the house. She began crying again at the sight of me, and said, poor soul, truly enough, that it was dreadful to feel herself turned out into the world as if she had committed some unpardonable fault, when no blame could be laid at her door by anybody—not even by her master, who had sent her away.

"Try to make the best of it, Fanny," I said. "Your mistress and I will stand your friends, and will take care that your character shall not suffer. Now, listen to me. I have very little time to spare, and I am going to put a great trust in your hands. I wish you to take care of these two letters. The one with the stamp on it you are to put into the post when you reach London to-morrow. The other, directed to Mr. Fairlie, you are to deliver to him yourself as soon as you get home. Keep both the letters about you and give them up to no one. They are of the last importance to your mistress's interests."

Fanny put the letters into the bosom of her dress. "There they shall stop, miss," she said, "till I have done what you tell me."

"Mind you are at the station in good time to-morrow morning," I continued. "And when you see the housekeeper at Limmeridge give her my compliments, and say that you are in my service until Lady Glyde is able to take you back. We may meet again sooner than you think. So keep a good heart, and don't miss the seven o'clock train."

"Thank you, miss—thank you kindly. It gives one courage to hear your voice again. Please to offer my duty to my lady, and say I left all the things as tidy as I could in the time. Oh, dear! dear! who will dress her for dinner to-day? It really breaks my heart, miss, to think of it."

When I got back to the house I had only a quarter of an hour to spare to put myself in order for dinner, and to say two words to Laura before I went downstairs.

"The letters are in Fanny's hands," I whispered to her at the door. "Do you mean to join us at dinner?"

"Oh, no, no—not for the world."

"Has anything happened? Has any one disturbed you?"

"Yes—just now—Sir Percival——"

"Did he come in?"

"No, he frightened me by a thump on the door outside. I said, 'Who's there?' 'You know,' he answered. 'Will you alter your mind, and tell me the rest? You shall! Sooner or later I'll wring it

out of you. You know where Anne Catherick is at this moment.' 'Indeed, indeed,' I said, 'I don't.' 'You do!' he called back. 'I'll crush your obstinacy—mind that!—I'll wring it out of you!' He went away with those words—went away, Marian, hardly five minutes ago."

He had not found Anne! We were safe for that night—he had not found her yet.

"You are going downstairs, Marian? Come up again in the evening."

"Yes, yes. Don't be uneasy if I am a little late—I must be careful not to give offence by leaving them too soon."

The dinner-bell rang and I hastened away.

Sir Percival took Madame Fosco into the dining-room, and the Count gave me his arm. He was hot and flushed, and was not dressed with his customary care and completeness. Had he, too, been out before dinner, and been late in getting back? or was he only suffering from the heat a little more severely than usual?

However this might be, he was unquestionably troubled by some secret annoyance or anxiety, which, with all his powers of deception, he was not able entirely to conceal. Through the whole of dinner he was almost as silent as Sir Percival himself, and he, every now and then, looked at his wife with an expression of furtive uneasiness which was quite new in my experience of him. The one social obligation which he seemed to be self-possessed enough to perform as carefully as ever was the obligation of being persistently civil and attentive to me. What vile object he has in view I cannot still discover, but be the design what it may, invariable politeness towards myself, invariable humility towards Laura, and invariable suppression (at any cost) of Sir Percival's clumsy violence, have been the means he has resolutely and impenetrably used to get to his end ever since he set foot in this house. I suspected it when he first interfered in our favour, on the day when the deed was produced in the library, and I feel certain of it now.

When Madame Fosco and I rose to leave the table, the Count rose also to accompany us back to the drawing-room.

"What are you going away for?" asked Sir Percival—"I mean YOU, Fosco."

"I am going away because I have had dinner enough, and wine enough," answered the Count. "Be so kind, Percival, as to make allowances for my foreign habit of going out with the ladies, as well as coming in with them."

"Nonsense! Another glass of claret won't hurt you. Sit down again like an Englishman. I want half an hour's quiet talk with you over our wine."

"A quiet talk, Percival, with all my heart, but not now, and not over the wine. Later in the evening, if you please—later in the evening."

"Civil!" said Sir Percival savagely. "Civil behaviour, upon my soul, to a man in his own house!"

I had more than once seen him look at the Count uneasily during dinner-time, and had observed that the Count carefully abstained from looking at him in return. This circumstance, coupled with the host's anxiety for a little quiet talk over the wine, and the guest's obstinate resolution not to sit down again at the table, revived in my memory the request which Sir Percival had vainly addressed to his friend earlier in the day to come out of the library and speak to him. The Count had deferred granting that private interview, when it was first asked for in the afternoon, and had again deferred granting it, when it was a second time asked for at the dinner-table. Whatever the coming subject of discussion between them might be, it was clearly an important subject in Sir Percival's estimation—and perhaps (judging from his evident reluctance to approach it) a dangerous subject as well, in the estimation of the Count.

These considerations occurred to me while we were passing from the dining-room to the drawing-room. Sir Percival's angry commentary on his friend's desertion of him had not produced the slightest effect. The Count obstinately accompanied us to the tea-table— waited a minute or two in the room—went out into the hall—and returned with the post-bag in his hands. It was then eight o'clock—the hour at which the letters were always despatched from Blackwater Park.

"Have you any letter for the post, Miss Halcombe?" he asked, approaching me with the bag.

I saw Madame Fosco, who was making the tea, pause, with the sugar- tongs in her hand, to listen for my answer.

"No, Count, thank you. No letters to-day."

He gave the bag to the servant, who was then in the room; sat down at the piano, and played the air of the lively Neapolitan street- song, "La mia Carolina," twice over. His wife, who was usually the most deliberate of women in all her movements, made the tea as quickly as I could have made it myself—finished her own cup in two minutes, and quietly glided out of the room.

I rose to follow her example—partly because I suspected her of attempting some treachery upstairs with Laura, partly because I was resolved not to remain alone in the same room with her husband.

Before I could get to the door the Count stopped me, by a request for a cup of tea. I gave him the cup of tea, and tried a second time to get away. He stopped me again—this time by going back to the piano, and suddenly appealing to me on a musical question in which he declared that the honour of his country was concerned.

I vainly pleaded my own total ignorance of music, and total want of taste in that direction. He only appealed to me again with a vehemence which set all further protest on my part at defiance. "The English and the Germans (he indignantly declared) were always reviling the Italians for their inability to cultivate the higher kinds of music. We were perpetually talking of our Oratorios, and they were perpetually talking of their Symphonies. Did we forget and did they forget his immortal friend and countryman, Rossini? What was Moses in Egypt but a sublime oratorio, which was acted on the stage instead of being coldly sung in a concert-room? What was the overture to Guillaume Tell but a symphony under another name? Had I heard Moses in Egypt? Would I listen to this, and this, and this, and say if anything more sublimely sacred and grand had ever been composed by mortal man?"—And without waiting for a word of assent or dissent on my part, looking me hard in the face all the time, he began thundering on the piano, and singing to it with loud and lofty enthusiasm—only interrupting himself, at intervals, to announce to me fiercely the titles of the different pieces of music: "Chorus of Egyptians in the Plague of Darkness, Miss Halcombe!"—"Recitativo of Moses with the tables of the Law."—"Prayer of Israelites, at the passage of the Red Sea. Aha! Aha! Is that sacred? is that sublime?" The piano trembled under his powerful hands, and the teacups on the table rattled, as his big bass voice thundered out the notes, and his heavy foot beat time on the floor.

There was something horrible—something fierce and devilish—in the outburst of his delight at his own singing and playing, and in the triumph with which he watched its effect upon me as I shrank nearer and nearer to the door. I was released at last, not by my own efforts, but by Sir Percival's interposition. He opened the dining-room door, and called out angrily to know what "that infernal noise" meant. The Count instantly got up from the piano. "Ah! if Percival is coming," he said, "harmony and melody are both at an end. The Muse of Music, Miss Halcombe, deserts us in dismay, and I, the fat old minstrel, exhale the rest of my enthusiasm in the open

air!” He stalked out into the verandah, put his hands in his pockets, and resumed the Recitativo of Moses, sotto voce, in the garden.

I heard Sir Percival call after him from the dining-room window. But he took no notice—he seemed determined not to hear. That long-deferred quiet talk between them was still to be put off, was still to wait for the Count’s absolute will and pleasure.

He had detained me in the drawing-room nearly half an hour from the time when his wife left us. Where had she been, and what had she been doing in that interval?

I went upstairs to ascertain, but I made no discoveries, and when I questioned Laura, I found that she had not heard anything. Nobody had disturbed her, no faint rustling of the silk dress had been audible, either in the ante-room or in the passage.

It was then twenty minutes to nine. After going to my room to get my journal, I returned, and sat with Laura, sometimes writing, sometimes stopping to talk with her. Nobody came near us, and nothing happened. We remained together till ten o’clock. I then rose, said my last cheering words, and wished her good-night. She locked her door again after we had arranged that I should come in and see her the first thing in the morning.

I had a few sentences more to add to my diary before going to bed myself, and as I went down again to the drawing-room after leaving Laura for the last time that weary day, I resolved merely to show myself there, to make my excuses, and then to retire an hour earlier than usual for the night.

Sir Percival, and the Count and his wife, were sitting together. Sir Percival was yawning in an easy-chair, the Count was reading, Madame Fosco was fanning herself. Strange to say, HER face was flushed now. She, who never suffered from the heat, was most undoubtedly suffering from it to-night.

“I am afraid, Countess, you are not quite so well as usual?” I said.

“The very remark I was about to make to you,” she replied. “You are looking pale, my dear.”

My dear! It was the first time she had ever addressed me with that familiarity! There was an insolent smile too on her face when she said the words.

“I am suffering from one of my bad headaches,” I answered coldly.

“Ah, indeed? Want of exercise, I suppose? A walk before dinner would have been just the thing for you.” She referred to the “walk” with a strange emphasis. Had she seen me go out? No matter if she had. The letters were safe now in Fanny’s hands.

“Come and have a smoke, Fosco,” said Sir Percival, rising, with another uneasy look at his friend.

“With pleasure, Percival, when the ladies have gone to bed,” replied the Count.

“Excuse me, Countess, if I set you the example of retiring,” I said. “The only remedy for such a headache as mine is going to bed.”

I took my leave. There was the same insolent smile on the woman’s face when I shook hands with her. Sir Percival paid no attention to me. He was looking impatiently at Madame Fosco, who showed no signs of leaving the room with me. The Count smiled to himself behind his book. There was yet another delay to that quiet talk with Sir Percival—and the Countess was the impediment this time.

IX

June 19th.—Once safely shut into my own room, I opened these pages, and prepared to go on with that part of the day's record which was still left to write.

For ten minutes or more I sat idle, with the pen in my hand, thinking over the events of the last twelve hours. When I at last addressed myself to my task, I found a difficulty in proceeding with it which I had never experienced before. In spite of my efforts to fix my thoughts on the matter in hand, they wandered away with the strangest persistency in the one direction of Sir Percival and the Count, and all the interest which I tried to concentrate on my journal centred instead in that private interview between them which had been put off all through the day, and which was now to take place in the silence and solitude of the night.

In this perverse state of my mind, the recollection of what had passed since the morning would not come back to me, and there was no resource but to close my journal and to get away from it for a little while.

I opened the door which led from my bedroom into my sitting-room, and having passed through, pulled it to again, to prevent any accident in case of draught with the candle left on the dressing- table. My sitting-room window was wide open, and I leaned out listlessly to look at the night.

It was dark and quiet. Neither moon nor stars were visible. There was a smell like rain in the still, heavy air, and I put my hand out of window. No. The rain was only threatening, it had not come yet.

I remained leaning on the window-sill for nearly a quarter of an hour, looking out absently into the black darkness, and hearing nothing, except now and then the voices of the servants, or the distant sound of a closing door, in the lower part of the house.

Just as I was turning away wearily from the window to go back to the bedroom and make a second attempt to complete the unfinished entry in my journal, I smelt the odour of tobacco-smoke stealing towards me on the heavy night air. The next moment I saw a tiny red spark advancing from the farther end of the house in the pitch darkness. I heard no footsteps, and I could see nothing but the spark. It travelled along in the night, passed the window at which I was standing, and stopped opposite my bedroom window, inside which I had left the light burning on the dressing-table.

The spark remained stationary for a moment, then moved back again in the direction from which it had advanced. As I followed its progress I saw a second red spark, larger than the first, approaching from the distance. The two met together in the darkness. Remembering who smoked cigarettes and who smoked cigars, I inferred immediately that the Count had come out first to look and listen under my window, and that Sir Percival had afterwards joined him. They must both have been walking on the lawn—or I should certainly have heard Sir Percival's heavy footfall, though the Count's soft step might have escaped me, even on the gravel walk.

I waited quietly at the window, certain that they could neither of them see me in the darkness of the room.

"What's the matter?" I heard Sir Percival say in a low voice. "Why don't you come in and sit down?"

"I want to see the light out of that window," replied the Count softly.

"What harm does the light do?"

"It shows she is not in bed yet. She is sharp enough to suspect something, and bold enough to come downstairs and listen, if she can get the chance. Patience, Percival—patience."

“Humbug! You’re always talking of patience.”

“I shall talk of something else presently. My good friend, you are on the edge of your domestic precipice, and if I let you give the women one other chance, on my sacred word of honour they will push you over it!”

“What the devil do you mean?”

“We will come to our explanations, Percival, when the light is out of that window, and when I have had one little look at the rooms on each side of the library, and a peep at the staircase as well.”

They slowly moved away, and the rest of the conversation between them (which had been conducted throughout in the same low tones) ceased to be audible. It was no matter. I had heard enough to determine me on justifying the Count’s opinion of my sharpness and my courage. Before the red sparks were out of sight in the darkness I had made up my mind that there should be a listener when those two men sat down to their talk—and that the listener, in spite of all the Count’s precautions to the contrary, should be myself. I wanted but one motive to sanction the act to my own conscience, and to give me courage enough for performing it—and that motive I had. Laura’s honour, Laura’s happiness—Laura’s life itself—might depend on my quick ears and my faithful memory to-night.

I had heard the Count say that he meant to examine the rooms on each side of the library, and the staircase as well, before he entered on any explanation with Sir Percival. This expression of his intentions was necessarily sufficient to inform me that the library was the room in which he proposed that the conversation should take place. The one moment of time which was long enough to bring me to that conclusion was also the moment which showed me a means of baffling his precautions—or, in other words, of hearing what he and Sir Percival said to each other, without the risk of descending at all into the lower regions of the house.

In speaking of the rooms on the ground floor I have mentioned incidentally the verandah outside them, on which they all opened by means of French windows, extending from the cornice to the floor. The top of this verandah was flat, the rain-water being carried off from it by pipes into tanks which helped to supply the house. On the narrow leaden roof, which ran along past the bedrooms, and which was rather less, I should think, than three feet below the sills of the window, a row of flower-pots was ranged, with wide intervals between each pot—the whole being protected from falling in high winds by an ornamental iron railing along the edge of the roof.

The plan which had now occurred to me was to get out at my sitting-room window on to this roof, to creep along noiselessly till I reached that part of it which was immediately over the library window, and to crouch down between the flower-pots, with my ear against the outer railing. If Sir Percival and the Count sat and smoked to-night, as I had seen them sitting and smoking many nights before, with their chairs close at the open window, and their feet stretched on the zinc garden seats which were placed under the verandah, every word they said to each other above a whisper (and no long conversation, as we all know by experience, can be carried on IN a whisper) must inevitably reach my ears. If, on the other hand, they chose to-night to sit far back inside the room, then the chances were that I should hear little or nothing—and in that case, I must run the far more serious risk of trying to outwit them downstairs.

Strongly as I was fortified in my resolution by the desperate nature of our situation, I hoped most fervently that I might escape this last emergency. My courage was only a woman’s courage after all, and it was very near to failing me when I thought of trusting myself on the ground floor, at the dead of night, within reach of Sir Percival and the Count.

I went softly back to my bedroom to try the safer experiment of the verandah roof first.

A complete change in my dress was imperatively necessary for many reasons. I took off my silk gown to begin with, because the slightest noise from it on that still night might have betrayed me. I next removed the white and cumbersome parts of my underclothing, and replaced them by a petticoat of dark flannel. Over this I put my black travelling cloak, and pulled the hood on to my head. In my ordinary evening costume I took up the room of three men at least. In my present dress, when it was held close about me, no man could have passed through the narrowest spaces more easily than I. The little breadth left on the roof of the verandah, between the flower-pots on one side and the wall and the windows of the house on the other, made this a serious consideration. If I knocked anything down, if I made the least noise, who could say what the consequences might be?

I only waited to put the matches near the candle before I extinguished it, and groped my way back into the sitting-room, I locked that door, as I had locked my bedroom door—then quietly got out of the window, and cautiously set my feet on the leaden roof of the verandah.

My two rooms were at the inner extremity of the new wing of the house in which we all lived, and I had five windows to pass before I could reach the position it was necessary to take up immediately over the library. The first window belonged to a spare room which was empty. The second and third windows belonged to Laura's room. The fourth window belonged to Sir Percival's room. The fifth belonged to the Countess's room. The others, by which it was not necessary for me to pass, were the windows of the Count's dressing-room, of the bath-room, and of the second empty spare room.

No sound reached my ears—the black blinding darkness of the night was all round me when I first stood on the verandah, except at that part of it which Madame Fosco's window over-looked. There, at the very place above the library to which my course was directed—there I saw a gleam of light! The Countess was not yet in bed.

It was too late to draw back—it was no time to wait. I determined to go on at all hazards, and trust for security to my own caution and to the darkness of the night. "For Laura's sake!" I thought to myself, as I took the first step forward on the roof, with one hand holding my cloak close round me, and the other groping against the wall of the house. It was better to brush close by the wall than to risk striking my feet against the flower-pots within a few inches of me, on the other side.

I passed the dark window of the spare room, trying the leaden roof at each step with my foot before I risked resting my weight on it. I passed the dark windows of Laura's room ("God bless her and keep her to-night!"). I passed the dark window of Sir Percival's room. Then I waited a moment, knelt down with my hands to support me, and so crept to my position, under the protection of the low wall between the bottom of the lighted window and the verandah roof.

When I ventured to look up at the window itself I found that the top of it only was open, and that the blind inside was drawn down. While I was looking I saw the shadow of Madame Fosco pass across the white field of the blind—then pass slowly back again. Thus far she could not have heard me, or the shadow would surely have stopped at the blind, even if she had wanted courage enough to open the window and look out?

I placed myself sideways against the railing of the verandah— first ascertaining, by touching them, the position of the flower- pots on either side of me. There was room enough for me to sit between them and no more. The sweet-scented leaves of the flower on my left hand just brushed my cheek as I lightly rested my head against the railing.

The first sounds that reached me from below were caused by the opening or closing (most probably the latter) of three doors in succession—the doors, no doubt, leading into the hall and into the rooms on each side of the library, which the Count had pledged himself to examine. The first object that I saw was the red spark again travelling out into the night from under the verandah, moving away towards my window, waiting a moment, and then returning to the place from which it had set out.

"The devil take your restlessness! When do you mean to sit down?" growled Sir Percival's voice beneath me.

"Ouf! how hot it is!" said the Count, sighing and puffing wearily.

His exclamation was followed by the scraping of the garden chairs on the tiled pavement under the verandah—the welcome sound which told me they were going to sit close at the window as usual. So far the chance was mine. The clock in the turret struck the quarter to twelve as they settled themselves in their chairs. I heard Madame Fosco through the open window yawning, and saw her shadow pass once more across the white field of the blind.

Meanwhile, Sir Percival and the Count began talking together below, now and then dropping their voices a little lower than usual, but never sinking them to a whisper. The strangeness and peril of my situation, the dread, which I could not master, of Madame Fosco's lighted window, made it difficult, almost impossible, for me, at first, to keep my presence of mind, and to fix my attention solely on the conversation beneath. For some minutes I could only succeed in gathering the general substance of it. I understood the Count to say that the one window alight was his wife's, that the ground floor of the house was quite clear, and that they might now speak to each other without fear of accidents. Sir Percival merely answered by upbraiding his friend with having unjustifiably slighted his wishes and neglected his interests all through the day. The Count thereupon defended himself by declaring that he had been beset by certain troubles and anxieties which had absorbed all his attention, and that the only safe time to come to an explanation was a time when they could feel certain of being neither interrupted nor overheard. "We are at a serious crisis in our affairs, Percival," he said, "and if we are to decide on the future at all, we must decide secretly to-night."

That sentence of the Count's was the first which my attention was ready enough to master exactly as it was spoken. From this point, with certain breaks and interruptions, my whole interest fixed breathlessly on the conversation, and I followed it word for word.

"Crisis?" repeated Sir Percival. "It's a worse crisis than you think for, I can tell you."

"So I should suppose, from your behaviour for the last day or two," returned the other coolly. "But wait a little. Before we advance to what I do NOT know, let us be quite certain of what I DO know. Let us first see if I am right about the time that is past, before I make any proposal to you for the time that is to come."

"Stop till I get the brandy and water. Have some yourself."

"Thank you, Percival. The cold water with pleasure, a spoon, and the basin of sugar. Eau sucree, my friend—nothing more.

"Sugar-and-water for a man of your age!—There! mix your sickly mess. You foreigners are all alike."

"Now listen, Percival. I will put our position plainly before you, as I understand it, and you shall say if I am right or wrong. You and I both came back to this house from the Continent with our affairs very seriously embarrassed "

"Cut it short! I wanted some thousands and you some hundreds, and without the money we were both in a fair way to go to the dogs together. There's the situation. Make what you can of it. Go on."

"Well, Percival, in your own solid English words, you wanted some thousands and I wanted some hundreds, and the only way of getting them was for you to raise the money for your own necessity (with a small margin beyond for my poor little hundreds) by the help of your wife. What did I tell you about your wife on our way to England?—and what did I tell you again when we had come here, and when I had seen for myself the sort of woman Miss Halcombe was?"

"How should I know? You talked nineteen to the dozen, I suppose, just as usual."

"I said this: Human ingenuity, my friend, has hitherto only discovered two ways in which a man can manage a woman. One way is to knock her down—a method largely adopted by the brutal lower orders of the people, but utterly abhorrent to the refined and educated classes above them. The other way (much longer, much more difficult, but in the end not less certain) is never to accept a provocation at a woman's hands. It holds with animals, it holds with children, and it holds with women, who are nothing but children grown up. Quiet resolution is the one quality the animals, the children, and the women all fail in. If they can once shake this superior quality in their master, they get the better of HIM. If they can never succeed in disturbing it, he gets the better of THEM. I said to you, Remember that plain truth when you want your wife to help you to the money. I said, Remember it doubly and trebly in the presence of your wife's sister, Miss Halcombe. Have you remembered it? Not once in all the implications that have twisted themselves about us in this house. Every provocation that your wife and her sister could offer to you, you instantly accepted from them. Your mad temper lost the signature to the deed, lost the ready money, set Miss Halcombe writing to the lawyer for the first time "

"First time! Has she written again?"

"Yes, she has written again to-day." A chair fell on the pavement of the verandah—fell with a crash, as if it had been kicked down.

It was well for me that the Count's revelation roused Sir Pemival's anger as it did. On hearing that I had been once more discovered I started so that the railing against which I leaned cracked again. Had he followed me to the inn? Did he infer that I must have given my letters to Fanny when I told him I had none for the post-bag. Even if it was so, how could he have examined the letters when they had gone straight from my hand to the bosom of the girl's dress?

"Thank your lucky star," I heard the Count say next, "that you have me in the house to undo the harm as fast as you do it. Thank your lucky star that I said No when you were mad enough to talk of turning the key to-day on Miss Halcombe, as you turned it in your mischievous folly on your wife. Where are your eves? Can you look at Miss Halcombe and not see that she has the foresight and the resolution of a man? With that woman for my friend I would snap these fingers of mine at the world. With that woman for my enemy, I, with all my brains and experience—I, Fosco, cunning as the devil himself, as you have told me a hundred times—I walk, in your English phrase, upon egg-shells! And this grand creature—I drink her health in my sugar-and-water—this grand creature, who stands in the strength of her love and her courage, firm as a rock, between us two and that poor, flimsy, pretty blonde wife of yours—this magnificent woman, whom I admire with all my soul, though I oppose her in your interests and in mine, you drive to extremities as if she was no sharper and no bolder than the rest of her sex. Percival! Percival! you deserve to fail, and you HAVE failed."

There was a pause. I write the villain's words about myself because I mean to remember them—because I hope yet for the day when I may speak out once for all in his presence, and cast them back one by one in his teeth.

Sir Percival was the first to break the silence again.

"Yes, yes, bully and bluster as much as you like," he said sulkily; "the difficulty about the money is not the only difficulty. You would be for taking strong measures with the women yourself—if you knew as much as I do."

"We will come to that second difficulty all in good time," rejoined the Count. "You may confuse yourself, Percival, as much as you please, but you shall not confuse me. Let the question of the money be settled first. Have I convinced your obstinacy? have I shown you that your temper will not let you help yourself?—Or must I go back, and (as you put it in your dear straightforward English) bully and bluster a little more?"

"Pooh! It's easy enough to grumble at ME. Say what is to be done— that's a little harder."

"Is it? Bah! This is what is to be done: You give up all direction in the business from to-night—you leave it for the future in my hands only. I am talking to a Practical British man—ha? Well, Practical, will that do for you?"

"What do you propose if I leave it all to you?"

"Answer me first. Is it to be in my hands or not?"

"Say it is in your hands—what then?"

"A few questions, Percival, to begin with. I must wait a little yet, to let circumstances guide me, and I must know, in every possible way, what those circumstances are likely to be. There is no time to lose. I have told you already that Miss Halcombe has written to the lawyer to-day for the second time."

"How did you find it out? What did she say?"

"If I told you, Percival, we should only come back at the end to where we are now. Enough that I have found it out—and the finding has caused that trouble and anxiety which made me so inaccessible to you all through to-day. Now, to refresh my memory about your affairs—it is some time since I talked them over with you. The money has been raised, in the absence of your wife's signature, by means of bills at three months—raised at a cost that makes my poverty-stricken foreign hair stand on end to think of it! When the bills are due, is there really and truly no earthly way of paying them but by the help of your wife?"

"None."

"What! You have no money at the bankers?"

"A few hundreds, when I want as many thousands."

"Have you no other security to borrow upon?"

"Not a shred."

"What have you actually got with your wife at the present moment?"

"Nothing but the interest of her twenty thousand pounds—barely enough to pay our daily expenses."

"What do you expect from your wife?"

"Three thousand a year when her uncle dies."

"A fine fortune, Percival. What sort of a man is this uncle? Old?"

"No—neither old nor young."

"A good-tempered, freely-living man? Married? No—I think my wife told me, not married."

"Of course not. If he was married, and had a son, Lady Glyde would not be next heir to the property. I'll tell you what he is. He's a maudlin, twaddling, selfish fool, and bores everybody who comes near him about the state of his health."

"Men of that sort, Percival, live long, and marry malevolently when you least expect it. I don't give you much, my friend, for your chance of the three thousand a year. Is there nothing more that comes to you from your wife?"

"Nothing."

"Absolutely nothing?"

"Absolutely nothing—except in case of her death."

"Aha! in the case of her death."

There was another pause. The Count moved from the verandah to the gravel walk outside. I knew that he had moved by his voice. "The rain has come at last," I heard him say. It had come. The state of my cloak showed that it had been falling thickly for some little time.

The Count went back under the verandah—I heard the chair creak beneath his weight as he sat down in it again.

"Well, Percival," he said, "and in the case of Lady Glyde's death, what do you get then?"

"If she leaves no children——"

"Which she is likely to do?"

"Which she is not in the least likely to do——"

"Yes?"

"Why, then I get her twenty thousand pounds."

"Paid down?"

"Paid down."

They were silent once more. As their voices ceased Madame Fosco's shadow darkened the blind again. Instead of passing this time, it remained, for a moment, quite still. I saw her fingers steal round the corner of the blind, and draw it on one side. The dim white outline of her face, looking out straight over me, appeared behind the window. I kept still, shrouded from head to foot in my black cloak. The rain, which was fast wetting me, dripped over the glass, blurred it, and prevented her from seeing anything. "More rain!" I heard her say to herself. She dropped the blind, and I breathed again freely.

The talk went on below me, the Count resuming it this time.

"Percival! do you care about your wife?"

"Fosco! that's rather a downright question."

"I am a downright man, and I repeat it."

"Why the devil do you look at me in that way?"

"You won't answer me? Well, then, let us say your wife dies before the summer is out——"

"Drop it, Fosco!"

"Let us say your wife dies——"

"Drop it, I tell you!"

"In that case, you would gain twenty thousand pounds, and you would lose——"

"I should lose the chance of three thousand a year."

"The REMOTE chance, Percival—the remote chance only. And you want money, at once. In your position the gain is certain—the loss doubtful."

"Speak for yourself as well as for me. Some of the money I want has been borrowed for you. And if you come to gain, my wife's death would be ten thousand pounds in your wife's pocket. Sharp as you are, you seem to have conveniently forgotten Madame Fosco's legacy. Don't look

at me in that way! I won't have it! What with your looks and your questions, upon my soul, you make my flesh creep!"

"Your flesh? Does flesh mean conscience in English? speak of your wife's death as I speak of a possibility. Why not? The respectable lawyers who scribble-scrabble your deeds and your wills look the deaths of living people in the face. Do lawyers make your flesh creep? Why should I? It is my business to-night to clear up your position beyond the possibility of mistake, and I have now done it. Here is your position. If your wife lives, you pay those bills with her signature to the parchment. If your wife dies, you pay them with her death."

As he spoke the light in Madame Fosco's room was extinguished, and the whole second floor of the house was now sunk in darkness,

"Talk! talk!" grumbled Sir Percival. "One would think, to hear you, that my wife's signature to the deed was got already."

"You have left the matter in my hands," retorted the Count, "and I have more than two months before me to turn round in. Say no more about it, if you please, for the present. When the bills are due, you will see for yourself if my 'talk! talk!' is worth something, or if it is not. And now, Percival, having done with the money matters for to-night, I can place my attention at your disposal, if you wish to consult me on that second difficulty which has mixed itself up with our little embarrassments, and which has so altered you for the worse, that I hardly know you again. Speak, my friend—and pardon me if I shock your fiery national tastes by mixing myself a second glass of sugar-and-water."

"It's very well to say speak," replied Sir Percival, in a far more quiet and more polite tone than he had yet adopted, "but it's not so easy to know how to begin."

"Shall I help you?" suggested the Count. "Shall I give this private difficulty of yours a name? What if I call it—Anne Catherick?"

"Look here, Fosco, you and I have known each other for a long time, and if you have helped me out of one or two scrapes before this, I have done the best I could to help you in return, as far as money would go. We have made as many friendly sacrifices, on both sides, as men could, but we have had our secrets from each other, of course—haven't we?"

"You have had a secret from me, Percival. There is a skeleton in your cupboard here at Blackwater Park that has peeped out in these last few days at other people besides yourself."

"Well, suppose it has. If it doesn't concern you, you needn't be curious about it, need you?"

"Do I look curious about it?"

"Yes, you do."

"So! so! my face speaks the truth, then? What an immense foundation of good there must be in the nature of a man who arrives at my age, and whose face has not yet lost the habit of speaking the truth!—Come, Glyde! let us be candid one with the other. This secret of yours has sought me: I have not sought it. Let us say I am curious—do you ask me, as your old friend, to respect your secret, and to leave it, once for all, in your own keeping?"

"Yes—that's just what I do ask."

"Then my curiosity is at an end. It dies in me from this moment."

"Do you really mean that?"

"What makes you doubt me?"

"I have had some experience, Fosco, of your roundabout ways, and I am not so sure that you won't worm it out of me after all."

The chair below suddenly creaked again—I felt the trellis-work pillar under me shake from top to bottom. The Count had started to his feet, and had struck it with his hand in indignation.

"Percival! Percival!" he cried passionately, "do you know me no better than that? Has all your experience shown you nothing of my character yet? I am a man of the antique type! I am capable of the most exalted acts of virtue—when I have the chance of performing them. It has been the misfortune of my life that I have had few chances. My conception of friendship is sublime! Is it my fault that your skeleton has peeped out at me? Why do I confess my curiosity? You poor superficial Englishman, it is to magnify my own self-control. I could draw your secret out of you, if I liked, as I draw this finger out of the palm of my hand—you know I could! But you have appealed to my friendship, and the duties of friendship are sacred to me. See! I trample my base curiosity under my feet. My exalted sentiments lift me above it. Recognise them, Percival! imitate them, Percival! Shake hands—I forgive you."

His voice faltered over the last words—faltered, as if he were actually shedding tears!

Sir Percival confusedly attempted to excuse himself, but the Count was too magnanimous to listen to him.

"No!" he said. "When my friend has wounded me, I can pardon him without apologies. Tell me, in plain words, do you want my help?"

"Yes, badly enough."

"And you can ask for it without compromising yourself?"

"I can try, at any rate."

"Try, then."

"Well, this is how it stands:—I told you to-day that I had done my best to find Anne Catherick, and failed."

"Yes, you did."

"Fosco! I'm a lost man if I DON'T find her."

"Ha! Is it so serious as that?"

A little stream of light travelled out under the verandah, and fell over the gravel-walk. The Count had taken the lamp from the inner part of the room to see his friend clearly by the light of it.

"Yes!" he said. "Your face speaks the truth this time. Serious, indeed—as serious as the money matters themselves."

"More serious. As true as I sit here, more serious!"

The light disappeared again and the talk went on.

"I showed you the letter to my wife that Anne Catherick hid in the sand," Sir Percival continued. "There's no boasting in that letter, Fosco—she DOES know the Secret."

"Say as little as possible, Percival, in my presence, of the Secret. Does she know it from you?"

"No, from her mother."

"Two women in possession of your private mind—bad, bad, bad, my friend! One question here, before we go any farther. The motive of your shutting up the daughter in the asylum is now plain enough to me, but the manner of her escape is not quite so clear. Do you suspect the people in charge of her of closing their eyes purposely, at the instance of some enemy who could afford to make it worth their while?"

"No, she was the best-behaved patient they had—and, like fools, they trusted her. She's just mad enough to be shut up, and just sane enough to ruin me when she's at large—if you understand that?"

"I do understand it. Now, Percival, come at once to the point, and then I shall know what to do. Where is the danger of your position at the present moment?"

“Anne Catherick is in this neighbourhood, and in communication with Lady Glyde—there’s the danger, plain enough. Who can read the letter she hid in the sand, and not see that my wife is in possession of the Secret, deny it as she may?”

“One moment, Percival. If Lady Glyde does know the Secret, she must know also that it is a compromising secret for you. As your wife, surely it is her interest to keep it?”

“Is it? I’m coming to that. It might be her interest if she cared two straws about me. But I happen to be an encumbrance in the way of another man. She was in love with him before she married me— she’s in love with him now—an infernal vagabond of a drawing- master, named Hartright.”

“My dear friend! what is there extraordinary in that? They are all in love with some other man. Who gets the first of a woman’s heart? In all my experience I have never yet met with the man who was Number One. Number Two, sometimes. Number Three, Four, Five, often. Number One, never! He exists, of course—but I have not met with him.”

“Wait! I haven’t done yet. Who do you think helped Anne Catherick to get the start, when the people from the mad-house were after her? Hartright. Who do you think saw her again in Cumberland? Hartright. Both times he spoke to her alone. Stop! don’t interrupt me. The scoundrel’s as sweet on my wife as she is on him. He knows the Secret, and she knows the Secret. Once let them both get together again, and it’s her interest and his interest to turn their information against me.”

“Gently, Percival—gently! Are you insensible to the virtue of Lady Glyde?”

“That for the virtue of Lady Glyde! I believe in nothing about her but her money. Don’t you see how the case stands? She might be harmless enough by herself; but if she and that vagabond Hartright——”

“Yes, yes, I see. Where is Mr. Hartright?”

“Out of the country. If he means to keep a whole skin on his bones, I recommend him not to come back in a hurry.”

“Are you sure he is out of the country?”

“Certain. I had him watched from the time he left Cumberland to the time he sailed. Oh, I’ve been careful, I can tell you! Anne Catherick lived with some people at a farm-house near Limmeridge. I went there myself, after she had given me the slip, and made sure that they knew nothing. I gave her mother a form of letter to write to Miss Halcombe, exonerating me from any bad motive in putting her under restraint. I’ve spent, I’m afraid to say how much, in trying to trace her, and in spite of it all, she turns up here and escapes me on my own property! How do I know who else may see her, who else may speak to her? That prying scoundrel, Hartright, may come back with-out my knowing it, and may make use of her to-morrow——”

“Not he, Percival! While I am on the spot, and while that woman is in the neighbourhood, I will answer for our laying hands on her before Mr. Hartright—even if he does come back. I see! yes, yes, I see! The finding of Anne Catherick is the first necessity—make your mind easy about the rest. Your wife is here, under your thumb—Miss Halcombe is inseparable from her, and is, therefore, under your thumb also—and Mr. Hartright is out of the country. This invisible Anne of yours is all we have to think of for the present. You have made your inquiries?”

“Yes. I have been to her mother, I have ransacked the village— and all to no purpose.”

“Is her mother to be depended on?”

“Yes.”

“She has told your secret once.”

“She won’t tell it again.”

"Why not? Are her own interests concerned in keeping it, as well as yours?"

"Yes—deeply concerned."

"I am glad to hear it, Percival, for your sake. Don't be discouraged, my friend. Our money matters, as I told you, leave me plenty of time to turn round in, and I may search for Anne Catherick to-morrow to better purpose than you. One last question before we go to bed."

"What is it?"

"It is this. When I went to the boat-house to tell Lady Glyde that the little difficulty of her signature was put off, accident took me there in time to see a strange woman parting in a very suspicious manner from your wife. But accident did not bring me near enough to see this same woman's face plainly. I must know how to recognise our invisible Anne. What is she like?"

"Like? Come! I'll tell you in two words. She's a sickly likeness of my wife."

The chair creaked, and the pillar shook once more. The Count was on his feet again—this time in astonishment.

"What!!!" he exclaimed eagerly.

"Fancy my wife, after a bad illness, with a touch of something wrong in her head—and there is Anne Catherick for you," answered Sir Percival.

"Are they related to each other?"

"Not a bit of it."

"And yet so like?"

"Yes, so like. What are you laughing about?"

There was no answer, and no sound of any kind. The Count was laughing in his smooth silent internal way.

"What are you laughing about?" reiterated Sir Percival.

"Perhaps at my own fancies, my good friend. Allow me my Italian humour—do I not come of the illustrious nation which invented the exhibition of Punch? Well, well, well, I shall know Anne Catherick when I see her—and so enough for to-night. Make your mind easy, Percival. Sleep, my son, the sleep of the just, and see what I will do for you when daylight comes to help us both. I have my projects and my plans here in my big head. You shall pay those bills and find Anne Catherick—my sacred word of honour on it, but you shall! Am I a friend to be treasured in the best corner of your heart, or am I not? Am I worth those loans of money which you so delicately reminded me of a little while since? Whatever you do, never wound me in my sentiments any more. Recognise them, Percival! imitate them, Percival! I forgive you again—I shake hands again. Good-night!"

Not another word was spoken. I heard the Count close the library door. I heard Sir Percival barring up the window-shutters. It had been raining, raining all the time. I was cramped by my position and chilled to the bones. When I first tried to move, the effort was so painful to me that I was obliged to desist. I tried a second time, and succeeded in rising to my knees on the wet roof.

As I crept to the wall, and raised myself against it, I looked back, and saw the window of the Count's dressing-room gleam into light. My sinking courage flickered up in me again, and kept my eyes fixed on his window, as I stole my way back, step by step, past the wall of the house.

The clock struck the quarter after one, when I laid my hands on the window-sill of my own room. I had seen nothing and heard nothing which could lead me to suppose that my retreat had been discovered.

X

June 20th.—Eight o'clock. The sun is shining in a clear sky. I have not been near my bed—I have not once closed my weary wakeful eyes. From the same window at which I looked out into the darkness of last night, I look out now at the bright stillness of the morning.

I count the hours that have passed since I escaped to the shelter of this room by my own sensations—and those hours seem like weeks.

How short a time, and yet how long to ME—since I sank down in the darkness, here, on the floor—drenched to the skin, cramped in every limb, cold to the bones, a useless, helpless, panic-stricken creature.

I hardly know when I roused myself. I hardly know when I groped my way back to the bedroom, and lighted the candle, and searched (with a strange ignorance, at first, of where to look for them) for dry clothes to warm me. The doing of these things is in my mind, but not the time when they were done.

Can I even remember when the chilled, cramped feeling left me, and the throbbing heat came in its place?

Surely it was before the sun rose? Yes, I heard the clock strike three. I remember the time by the sudden brightness and clearness, the feverish strain and excitement of all my faculties which came with it. I remember my resolution to control myself, to wait patiently hour after hour, till the chance offered of removing Laura from this horrible place, without the danger of immediate discovery and pursuit. I remember the persuasion settling itself in my mind that the words those two men had said to each other would furnish us, not only with our justification for leaving the house, but with our weapons of defence against them as well. I recall the impulse that awakened in me to preserve those words in writing, exactly as they were spoken, while the time was my own, and while my memory vividly retained them. All this I remember plainly: there is no confusion in my head yet. The coming in here from the bedroom, with my pen and ink and paper, before sunrise—the sitting down at the widely- opened window to get all the air I could to cool me—the ceaseless writing, faster and faster, hotter and hotter, driving on more and more wakefully, all through the dreadful interval before the house was astir again—how clearly I recall it, from the beginning by candle-light, to the end on the page before this, in the sunshine of the new day!

Why do I sit here still? Why do I weary my hot eyes and my burning head by writing more? Why not lie down and rest myself, and try to quench the fever that consumes me, in sleep?

I dare not attempt it. A fear beyond all other fears has got possession of me. I am afraid of this heat that parches my skin. I am afraid of the creeping and throbbing that I feel in my head. If I lie down now, how do I know that I may have the sense and the strength to rise again?

Oh, the rain, the rain—the cruel rain that chilled me last night!

Nine o'clock. Was it nine struck, or eight? Nine, surely? I am shivering again—shivering, from head to foot, in the summer air. Have I been sitting here asleep? I don't know what I have been doing.

Oh, my God! am I going to be ill?

Ill, at such a time as this!

My head—I am sadly afraid of my head. I can write, but the lines all run together. I see the words. Laura—I can write Laura, and see I write it. Eight or nine—which was it?

So cold, so cold—oh, that rain last night!—and the strokes of the clock, the strokes I can't count, keep striking in my head——

NOTE

[At this place the entry in the Diary ceases to be legible. The two or three lines which follow contain fragments of words only, mingled with blots and scratches of the pen. The last marks on the paper bear some resemblance to the first two letters (L and A) of the name of Lady Glyde.

On the next page of the Diary, another entry appears. It is in a man's handwriting, large, bold, and firmly regular, and the date is "June the 21st." It contains these lines—]

POSTSCRIPT BY A SINCERE FRIEND

The illness of our excellent Miss Halcombe has afforded me the opportunity of enjoying an unexpected intellectual pleasure.

I refer to the perusal (which I have just completed) of this interesting Diary.

There are many hundred pages here. I can lay my hand on my heart, and declare that every page has charmed, refreshed, delighted me.

To a man of my sentiments it is unspeakably gratifying to be able to say this.

Admirable woman!

I allude to Miss Halcombe.

Stupendous effort!

I refer to the Diary.

Yes! these pages are amazing. The tact which I find here, the discretion, the rare courage, the wonderful power of memory, the accurate observation of character, the easy grace of style, the charming outbursts of womanly feeling, have all inexpressibly increased my admiration of this sublime creature, of this magnificent Marian. The presentation of my own character is masterly in the extreme. I certify, with my whole heart, to the fidelity of the portrait. I feel how vivid an impression I must have produced to have been painted in such strong, such rich, such massive colours as these. I lament afresh the cruel necessity which sets our interests at variance, and opposes us to each other. Under happier circumstances how worthy I should have been of Miss Halcombe—how worthy Miss Halcombe would have been of ME.

The sentiments which animate my heart assure me that the lines I have just written express a Profound Truth.

Those sentiments exalt me above all merely personal considerations. I bear witness, in the most disinterested manner, to the excellence of the stratagem by which this unparalleled woman surprised the private interview between Percival and myself— also to the marvellous accuracy of her report of the whole conversation from its beginning to its end.

Those sentiments have induced me to offer to the unimpressionable doctor who attends on her my vast knowledge of chemistry, and my luminous experience of the more subtle resources which medical and magnetic science have placed at the disposal of mankind. He has hitherto declined to avail himself of my assistance. Miserable man!

Finally, those sentiments dictate the lines—grateful, sympathetic, paternal lines—which appear in this place. I close the book. My strict sense of propriety restores it (by the hands of my wife) to its place on the writer's table. Events are hurrying me away. Circumstances are guiding me to serious issues. Vast perspectives of success unroll themselves before my eyes. I accomplish my destiny with a calmness which is terrible to myself. Nothing but the homage of my admiration is my own. I deposit it with respectful tenderness at the feet of Miss Halcombe.

I breathe my wishes for her recovery.

I condole with her on the inevitable failure of every plan that she has formed for her sister's benefit. At the same time, I entreat her to believe that the information which I have derived from her Diary will in no respect help me to contribute to that failure. It simply confirms the plan of conduct which I had previously arranged. I have to thank these pages for awakening the finest sensibilities in my nature—nothing more.

To a person of similar sensibility this simple assertion will explain and excuse everything.

Miss Halcombe is a person of similar sensibility.

In that persuasion I sign myself,

Fosco.