

The address communicated by Mrs. Todd took me to a lodging-house situated in a respectable street near the Gray's Inn Road.

When I knocked the door was opened by Mrs. Clements herself. She did not appear to remember me, and asked what my business was. I recalled to her our meeting in Limmeridge churchyard at the close of my interview there with the woman in white, taking special care to remind her that I was the person who assisted Anne Catherick (as Anne had herself declared) to escape the pursuit from the Asylum. This was my only claim to the confidence of Mrs. Clements. She remembered the circumstance the moment I spoke of it, and asked me into the parlour, in the greatest anxiety to know if I had brought her any news of Anne.

It was impossible for me to tell her the whole truth without, at the same time, entering into particulars on the subject of the conspiracy, which it would have been dangerous to confide to a stranger. I could only abstain most carefully from raising any false hopes, and then explain that the object of my visit was to discover the persons who were really responsible for Anne's disappearance. I even added, so as to exonerate myself from any after-reproach of my own conscience, that I entertained not the least hope of being able to trace her—that I believed we should never see her alive again—and that my main interest in the affair was to bring to punishment two men whom I suspected to be concerned in luring her away, and at whose hands I and some dear friends of mine had suffered a grievous wrong. With this explanation I left it to Mrs. Clements to say whether our interest in the matter (whatever difference there might be in the motives which actuated us) was not the same, and whether she felt any reluctance to forward my object by giving me such information on the subject of my inquiries as she happened to possess.

The poor woman was at first too much confused and agitated to understand thoroughly what I said to her. She could only reply that I was welcome to anything she could tell me in return for the kindness I had shown to Anne; but as she was not very quick and ready, at the best of times, in talking to strangers, she would beg me to put her in the right way, and to say where I wished her to begin.

Knowing by experience that the plainest narrative attainable from persons who are not accustomed to arrange their ideas, is the narrative which goes far enough back at the beginning to avoid all impediments of retrospection in its course, I asked Mrs. Clements to tell me first what had happened after she had left Limmeridge, and so, by watchful questioning, carried her on from point to point, till we reached the period of Anne's disappearance.

The substance of the information which I thus obtained was as follows:—

On leaving the farm at Todd's Corner, Mrs. Clements and Anne had travelled that day as far as Derby, and had remained there a week on Anne's account. They had then gone on to London, and had lived in the lodging occupied by Mrs. Clements at that time for a month or more, when circumstances connected with the house and the landlord had obliged them to change their quarters. Anne's terror of being discovered in London or its neighbourhood, whenever they ventured to walk out, had gradually communicated itself to Mrs. Clements, and she had determined on removing to one of the most out-of-the-way places in England—to the town of Grimsby in Lincolnshire, where her deceased husband had passed all his early life. His relatives were respectable people settled in the town—they had always treated Mrs. Clements with great kindness, and she thought it impossible to do better than go there and take the advice of her husband's friends. Anne would not hear of returning to her mother at Welmingham, because she

had been removed to the Asylum from that place, and because Sir Percival would be certain to go back there and find her again. There was serious weight in this objection, and Mrs. Clements felt that it was not to be easily removed.

At Grimsby the first serious symptoms of illness had shown themselves in Anne. They appeared soon after the news of Lady Glyde's marriage had been made public in the newspapers, and had reached her through that medium.

The medical man who was sent for to attend the sick woman discovered at once that she was suffering from a serious affection of the heart. The illness lasted long, left her very weak, and returned at intervals, though with mitigated severity, again and again. They remained at Grimsby, in consequence, during the first half of the new year, and there they might probably have stayed much longer, but for the sudden resolution which Anne took at this time to venture back to Hampshire, for the purpose of obtaining a private interview with Lady Glyde.

Mrs. Clements did all in her power to oppose the execution of this hazardous and unaccountable project. No explanation of her motives was offered by Anne, except that she believed the day of her death was not far off, and that she had something on her mind which must be communicated to Lady Glyde, at any risk, in secret. Her resolution to accomplish this purpose was so firmly settled that she declared her intention of going to Hampshire by herself if Mrs. Clements felt any unwillingness to go with her. The doctor, on being consulted, was of opinion that serious opposition to her wishes would, in all probability, produce another and perhaps a fatal fit of illness, and Mrs. Clements, under this advice, yielded to necessity, and once more, with sad forebodings of trouble and danger to come, allowed Anne Catherick to have her own way.

On the journey from London to Hampshire Mrs. Clements discovered that one of their fellow-passengers was well acquainted with the neighbourhood of Blackwater, and could give her all the information she needed on the subject of localities. In this way she found out that the only place they could go to, which was not dangerously near to Sir Percival's residence, was a large village called Sandon. The distance here from Blackwater Park was between three and four miles—and that distance, and back again, Anne had walked on each occasion when she had appeared in the neighbourhood of the lake.

For the few days during which they were at Sandon without being discovered they had lived a little away from the village, in the cottage of a decent widow-woman who had a bedroom to let, and whose discreet silence Mrs. Clements had done her best to secure, for the first week at least. She had also tried hard to induce Anne to be content with writing to Lady Glyde, in the first instance; but the failure of the warning contained in the anonymous letter sent to Limmeridge had made Anne resolute to speak this time, and obstinate in the determination to go on her errand alone.

Mrs. Clements, nevertheless, followed her privately on each occasion when she went to the lake, without, however, venturing near enough to the boat-house to be witness of what took place there. When Anne returned for the last time from the dangerous neighbourhood, the fatigue of walking, day after day, distances which were far too great for her strength, added to the exhausting effect of the agitation from which she had suffered, produced the result which Mrs. Clements had dreaded all along. The old pain over the heart and the other symptoms of the illness at Grimsby returned, and Anne was confined to her bed in the cottage.

In this emergency the first necessity, as Mrs. Clements knew by experience, was to endeavour to quiet Anne's anxiety of mind, and for this purpose the good woman went herself the next day to the lake, to try if she could find Lady Glyde (who would be sure, as Anne said, to take her

daily walk to the boat-house), and prevail on her to come back privately to the cottage near Sandon. On reaching the outskirts of the plantation Mrs. Clements encountered, not Lady Glyde, but a tall, stout, elderly gentleman, with a book in his hand—in other words, Count Fosco.

The Count, after looking at her very attentively for a moment, asked if she expected to see any one in that place, and added, before she could reply, that he was waiting there with a message from Lady Glyde, but that he was not quite certain whether the person then before him answered the description of the person with whom he was desired to communicate.

Upon this Mrs. Clements at once confided her errand to him, and entreated that he would help to allay Anne's anxiety by trusting his message to her. The Count most readily and kindly complied with her request. The message, he said, was a very important one. Lady Glyde entreated Anne and her good friend to return immediately to London, as she felt certain that Sir Percival would discover them if they remained any longer in the neighbourhood of Blackwater. She was herself going to London in a short time, and if Mrs. Clements and Anne would go there first, and would let her know what their address was, they should hear from her and see her in a fortnight or less. The Count added that he had already attempted to give a friendly warning to Anne herself, but that she had been too much startled by seeing that he was a stranger to let him approach and speak to her.

To this Mrs. Clements replied, in the greatest alarm and distress, that she asked nothing better than to take Anne safely to London, but that there was no present hope of removing her from the dangerous neighbourhood, as she lay ill in her bed at that moment. The Count inquired if Mrs. Clements had sent for medical advice, and hearing that she had hitherto hesitated to do so, from the fear of making their position publicly known in the village, informed her that he was himself a medical man, and that he would go back with her if she pleased, and see what could be done for Anne. Mrs. Clements (feeling a natural confidence in the Count, as a person trusted with a secret message from Lady Glyde) gratefully accepted the offer, and they went back together to the cottage.

Anne was asleep when they got there. The Count started at the sight of her (evidently from astonishment at her resemblance to Lady Glyde). Poor Mrs. Clements supposed that he was only shocked to see how ill she was. He would not allow her to be awakened—he was contented with putting questions to Mrs. Clements about her symptoms, with looking at her, and with lightly touching her pulse. Sandon was a large enough place to have a grocer's and druggist's shop in it, and thither the Count went to write his prescription and to get the medicine made up. He brought it back himself, and told Mrs. Clements that the medicine was a powerful stimulant, and that it would certainly give Anne strength to get up and bear the fatigue of a journey to London of only a few hours. The remedy was to be administered at stated times on that day and on the day after. On the third day she would be well enough to travel, and he arranged to meet Mrs. Clements at the Blackwater station, and to see them off by the mid-day train. If they did not appear he would assume that Anne was worse, and would proceed at once to the cottage.

As events turned out, no such emergency as this occurred.

This medicine had an extraordinary effect on Anne, and the good results of it were helped by the assurance Mrs. Clements could now give her that she would soon see Lady Glyde in London. At the appointed day and time (when they had not been quite so long as a week in Hampshire altogether), they arrived at the station. The Count was waiting there for them, and was talking to an elderly lady, who appeared to be going to travel by the train to London also. He most kindly assisted them, and put them into the carriage himself, begging Mrs. Clements not to forget to send her address to Lady Glyde. The elderly lady did not travel in the same compartment, and

they did not notice what became of her on reaching the London terminus. Mrs. Clements secured respectable lodgings in a quiet neighbourhood, and then wrote, as she had engaged to do, to inform Lady Glyde of the address.

A little more than a fortnight passed, and no answer came.

At the end of that time a lady (the same elderly lady whom they had seen at the station) called in a cab, and said that she came from Lady Glyde, who was then at an hotel in London, and who wished to see Mrs. Clements, for the purpose of arranging a future interview with Anne. Mrs. Clements expressed her willingness (Anne being present at the time, and entreating her to do so) to forward the object in view, especially as she was not required to be away from the house for more than half an hour at the most. She and the elderly lady (clearly Madame Fosco) then left in the cab. The lady stopped the cab, after it had driven some distance, at a shop before they got to the hotel, and begged Mrs. Clements to wait for her for a few minutes while she made a purchase that had been forgotten. She never appeared again.

After waiting some time Mrs. Clements became alarmed, and ordered the cabman to drive back to her lodgings. When she got there, after an absence of rather more than half an hour, Anne was gone.

The only information to be obtained from the people of the house was derived from the servant who waited on the lodgers. She had opened the door to a boy from the street, who had left a letter for "the young woman who lived on the second floor" (the part of the house which Mrs. Clements occupied). The servant had delivered the letter, had then gone downstairs, and five minutes afterwards had observed Anne open the front door and go out, dressed in her bonnet and shawl. She had probably taken the letter with her, for it was not to be found, and it was therefore impossible to tell what inducement had been offered to make her leave the house. It must have been a strong one, for she would never stir out alone in London of her own accord. If Mrs. Clements had not known this by experience nothing would have induced her to go away in the cab, even for so short a time as half an hour only.

As soon as she could collect her thoughts, the first idea that naturally occurred to Mrs. Clements was to go and make inquiries at the Asylum, to which she dreaded that Anne had been taken back.

She went there the next day, having been informed of the locality in which the house was situated by Anne herself. The answer she received (her application having in all probability been made a day or two before the false Anne Catherick had really been consigned to safe keeping in the Asylum) was, that no such person had been brought back there. She had then written to Mrs. Catherick at Welmingham to know if she had seen or heard anything of her daughter, and had received an answer in the negative. After that reply had reached her, she was at the end of her resources, and perfectly ignorant where else to inquire or what else to do. From that time to this she had remained in total ignorance of the cause of Anne's disappearance and of the end of Anne's story.

## VII

Thus far the information which I had received from Mrs. Clements— though it established facts of which I had not previously been aware—was of a preliminary character only.

It was clear that the series of deceptions which had removed Anne Catherick to London, and separated her from Mrs. Clements, had been accomplished solely by Count Fosco and the Countess, and the question whether any part of the conduct of husband or wife had been of a kind to place either of them within reach of the law might be well worthy of future consideration. But the purpose I had now in view led me in another direction than this. The immediate object of my visit to Mrs. Clements was to make some approach at least to the discovery of Sir Percival's secret, and she had said nothing as yet which advanced me on my way to that important end. I felt the necessity of trying to awaken her recollections of other times, persons, and events than those on which her memory had hitherto been employed, and when I next spoke I spoke with that object indirectly in view.

"I wish I could be of any help to you in this sad calamity," I said. "All I can do is to feel heartily for your distress. If Anne had been your own child, Mrs. Clements, you could have shown her no truer kindness—you could have made no readier sacrifices for her sake."

"There's no great merit in that, sir," said Mrs. Clements simply. "The poor thing was as good as my own child to me. I nursed her from a baby, sir, bringing her up by hand—and a hard job it was to rear her. It wouldn't go to my heart so to lose her if I hadn't made her first short clothes and taught her to walk. I always said she was sent to console me for never having chick or child of my own. And now she's lost the old times keep coming back to my mind, and even at my age I can't help crying about her—I can't indeed, sir!"

I waited a little to give Mrs. Clements time to compose herself. Was the light that I had been looking for so long glimmering on me—far off, as yet—in the good woman's recollections of Anne's early life?

"Did you know Mrs. Catherick before Anne was born?" I asked.

"Not very long, sir—not above four months. We saw a great deal of each other in that time, but we were never very friendly together."

Her voice was steadier as she made that reply. Painful as many of her recollections might be, I observed that it was unconsciously a relief to her mind to revert to the dimly-seen troubles of the past, after dwelling so long on the vivid sorrows of the present.

"Were you and Mrs. Catherick neighbours?" I inquired, leading her memory on as encouragingly as I could.

"Yes, sir—neighbours at Old Welmingham."

"OLD Welmingham? There are two places of that name, then, in Hampshire?"

"Well, sir, there used to be in those days—better than three-and- twenty years ago. They built a new town about two miles off, convenient to the river—and Old Welmingham, which was never much more than a village, got in time to be deserted. The new town is the place they call Welmingham now—but the old parish church is the parish church still. It stands by itself, with the houses pulled down or gone to ruin all round it. I've lived to see sad changes. It was a pleasant, pretty place in my time.

"Did you live there before your marriage, Mrs. Clements?"

"No, sir—I'm a Norfolk woman. It wasn't the place my husband belonged to either. He was from Grimsby, as I told you, and he served his apprenticeship there. But having friends down south, and hearing of an opening, he got into business at Southampton. It was in a small way, but he made enough for a plain man to retire on, and settled at Old Welmingham. I went there with him when he married me. We were neither of us young, but we lived very happy together—happier than our neighbour, Mr. Catherick, lived along with his wife when they came to Old Welmingham a year or two afterwards."

“Was your husband acquainted with them before that?”

“With Catherick, sir—not with his wife. She was a stranger to both of us. Some gentlemen had made interest for Catherick, and he got the situation of clerk at Welmingham church, which was the reason of his coming to settle in our neighbourhood. He brought his newly-married wife along with him, and we heard in course of time she had been lady’s-maid in a family that lived at Varneck Hall, near Southampton. Catherick had found it a hard matter to get her to marry him, in consequence of her holding herself uncommonly high. He had asked and asked, and given the thing up at last, seeing she was so contrary about it. When he HAD given it up she turned contrary just the other way, and came to him of her own accord, without rhyme or reason seemingly. My poor husband always said that was the time to have given her a lesson. But Catherick was too fond of her to do anything of the sort—he never checked her either before they were married or after. He was a quick man in his feelings, letting them carry him a deal too far, now in one way and now in another, and he would have spoilt a better wife than Mrs. Catherick if a better had married him. I don’t like to speak ill of any one, sir, but she was a heartless woman, with a terrible will of her own—fond of foolish admiration and fine clothes, and not caring to show so much as decent outward respect to Catherick, kindly as he always treated her. My husband said he thought things would turn out badly when they first came to live near us, and his words proved true. Before they had been quite four months in our neighbourhood there was a dreadful scandal and a miserable break-up in their household. Both of them were in fault—I am afraid both of them were equally in fault.”

“You mean both husband and wife?”

“Oh, no, sir! I don’t mean Catherick—he was only to be pitied. I meant his wife and the person—”

“And the person who caused the scandal?”

“Yes, sir. A gentleman born and brought up, who ought to have set a better example. You know him, sir—and my poor dear Anne knew him only too well.”

“Sir Percival Glyde?”

“Yes, Sir Percival Glyde.”

My heart beat fast—I thought I had my hand on the clue. How little I knew then of the windings of the labyrinths which were still to mislead me!

“Did Sir Percival live in your neighbourhood at that time?” I asked.

“No, sir. He came among us as a stranger. His father had died not long before in foreign parts. I remember he was in mourning. He put up at the little inn on the river (they have pulled it down since that time), where gentlemen used to go to fish. He wasn’t much noticed when he first came—it was a common thing enough for gentlemen to travel from all parts of England to fish in our river.”

“Did he make his appearance in the village before Anne was born?”

“Yes, sir. Anne was born in the June month of eighteen hundred and twenty-seven—and I think he came at the end of April or the beginning of May.”

“Came as a stranger to all of you? A stranger to Mrs. Catherick as well as to the rest of the neighbours?”

“So we thought at first, sir. But when the scandal broke out, nobody believed they were strangers. I remember how it happened as well as if it was yesterday. Catherick came into our garden one night, and woke us by throwing up a handful of gravel from the walk at our window. I heard him beg my husband, for the Lord’s sake, to come down and speak to him. They were a long time together talking in the porch. When my husband came back upstairs he was all of a

tremble. He sat down on the side of the bed and he says to me, 'Lizzie! I always told you that woman was a bad one—I always said she would end ill, and I'm afraid in my own mind that the end has come already. Catherick has found a lot of lace handkerchiefs, and two fine rings, and a new gold watch and chain, hid away in his wife's drawer—things that nobody but a born lady ought ever to have—and his wife won't say how she came by them.' 'Does he think she stole them?' says I. 'No,' says he, 'stealing would be bad enough. But it's worse than that, she's had no chance of stealing such things as those, and she's not a woman to take them if she had. They're gifts, Lizzie—there's her own initials engraved inside the watch—and Catherick has seen her talking privately, and carrying on as no married woman should, with that gentleman in mourning, Sir Percival Glyde. Don't you say anything about it—I've quieted Catherick for to-night. I've told him to keep his tongue to himself, and his eyes and his ears open, and to wait a day or two, till he can be quite certain.' 'I believe you are both of you wrong,' says I. 'It's not in nature, comfortable and respectable as she is here, that Mrs. Catherick should take up with a chance stranger like Sir Percival Glyde.' 'Ay, but is he a stranger to her?' says my husband. 'You forget how Catherick's wife came to marry him. She went to him of her own accord, after saying No over and over again when he asked her. There have been wicked women before her time, Lizzie, who have used honest men who loved them as a means of saving their characters, and I'm sorely afraid this Mrs. Catherick is as wicked as the worst of them. We shall see,' says my husband, 'we shall soon see.' And only two days afterwards we did see."

Mrs. Clements waited for a moment before she went on. Even in that moment, I began to doubt whether the clue that I thought I had found was really leading me to the central mystery of the labyrinth after all. Was this common, too common, story of a man's treachery and a woman's frailty the key to a secret which had been the life-long terror of Sir Percival Glyde?

"Well, sir, Catherick took my husband's advice and waited," Mrs. Clements continued. "And as I told you, he hadn't long to wait. On the second day he found his wife and Sir Percival whispering together quite familiar, close under the vestry of the church. I suppose they thought the neighbourhood of the vestry was the last place in the world where anybody would think of looking after them, but, however that may be, there they were. Sir Percival, being seemingly surprised and confounded, defended himself in such a guilty way that poor Catherick (whose quick temper I have told you of already) fell into a kind of frenzy at his own disgrace, and struck Sir Percival. He was no match (and I am sorry to say it) for the man who had wronged him, and he was beaten in the cruelest manner, before the neighbours, who had come to the place on hearing the disturbance, could run in to part them. All this happened towards evening, and before nightfall, when my husband went to Catherick's house, he was gone, nobody knew where. No living soul in the village ever saw him again. He knew too well, by that time, what his wife's vile reason had been for marrying him, and he felt his misery and disgrace, especially after what had happened to him with Sir Percival, too keenly. The clergyman of the parish put an advertisement in the paper begging him to come back, and saying that he should not lose his situation or his friends. But Catherick had too much pride and spirit, as some people said—too much feeling, as I think, sir—to face his neighbours again, and try to live down the memory of his disgrace. My husband heard from him when he had left England, and heard a second time, when he was settled and doing well in America. He is alive there now, as far as I know, but none of us in the old country—his wicked wife least of all—are ever likely to set eyes on him again."

"What became of Sir Percival?" I inquired. "Did he stay in the neighbourhood?"

"Not he, sir. The place was too hot to hold him. He was heard at high words with Mrs. Catherick the same night when the scandal broke out, and the next morning he took himself off."

“And Mrs. Catherick? Surely she never remained in the village among the people who knew of her disgrace?”

“She did, sir. She was hard enough and heartless enough to set the opinions of all her neighbours at flat defiance. She declared to everybody, from the clergyman downwards, that she was the victim of a dreadful mistake, and that all the scandal-mongers in the place should not drive her out of it, as if she was a guilty woman. All through my time she lived at Old Welmingham, and after my time, when the new town was building, and the respectable neighbours began moving to it, she moved too, as if she was determined to live among them and scandalise them to the very last. There she is now, and there she will stop, in defiance of the best of them, to her dying day.”

“But how has she lived through all these years?” I asked. “Was her husband able and willing to help her?”

“Both able and willing, sir,” said Mrs. Clements. “In the second letter he wrote to my good man, he said she had borne his name, and lived in his home, and, wicked as she was, she must not starve like a beggar in the street. He could afford to make her some small allowance, and she might draw for it quarterly at a place in London.”

“Did she accept the allowance?”

“Not a farthing of it, sir. She said she would never be beholden to Catherick for bit or drop, if she lived to be a hundred. And she has kept her word ever since. When my poor dear husband died, and left all to me, Catherick’s letter was put in my possession with the other things, and I told her to let me know if she was ever in want. ‘I’ll let all England know I’m in want,’ she said, ‘before I tell Catherick, or any friend of Catherick’s. Take that for your answer, and give it to HIM for an answer, if he ever writes again.’ ”

“Do you suppose that she had money of her own?”

“Very little, if any, sir. It was said, and said truly, I am afraid, that her means of living came privately from Sir Percival Glyde.”

After that last reply I waited a little, to reconsider what I had heard. If I unreservedly accepted the story so far, it was now plain that no approach, direct or indirect, to the Secret had yet been revealed to me, and that the pursuit of my object had ended again in leaving me face to face with the most palpable and the most disheartening failure.

But there was one point in the narrative which made me doubt the propriety of accepting it unreservedly, and which suggested the idea of something hidden below the surface.

I could not account to myself for the circumstance of the clerk’s guilty wife voluntarily living out all her after-existence on the scene of her disgrace. The woman’s own reported statement that she had taken this strange course as a practical assertion of her innocence did not satisfy me. It seemed, to my mind, more natural and more probable to assume that she was not so completely a free agent in this matter as she had herself asserted. In that case, who was the likeliest person to possess the power of compelling her to remain at Welmingham? The person unquestionably from whom she derived the means of living. She had refused assistance from her husband, she had no adequate resources of her own, she was a friendless, degraded woman—from what source should she derive help but from the source at which report pointed—Sir Percival Glyde?

Reasoning on these assumptions, and always bearing in mind the one certain fact to guide me, that Mrs. Catherick was in possession of the Secret, I easily understood that it was Sir Percival’s interest to keep her at Welmingham, because her character in that place was certain to isolate her from all communication with female neighbours, and to allow her no opportunities of talking

incautiously in moments of free intercourse with inquisitive bosom friends. But what was the mystery to be concealed? Not Sir Percival's infamous connection with Mrs. Catherick's disgrace, for the neighbours were the very people who knew of it—not the suspicion that he was Anne's father, for Welmingham was the place in which that suspicion must inevitably exist. If I accepted the guilty appearances described to me as unreservedly as others had accepted them, if I drew from them the same superficial conclusion which Mr. Catherick and all his neighbours had drawn, where was the suggestion, in all that I had heard, of a dangerous secret between Sir Percival and Mrs. Catherick, which had been kept hidden from that time to this?

And yet, in those stolen meetings, in those familiar whisperings between the clerk's wife and "the gentleman in mourning," the clue to discovery existed beyond a doubt.

Was it possible that appearances in this case had pointed one way while the truth lay all the while unsuspected in another direction? Could Mrs. Catherick's assertion, that she was the victim of a dreadful mistake, by any possibility be true? Or, assuming it to be false, could the conclusion which associated Sir Percival with her guilt have been founded in some inconceivable error? Had Sir Percival, by any chance, courted the suspicion that was wrong for the sake of diverting from himself some other suspicion that was right? Here—if I could find it—here was the approach to the Secret, hidden deep under the surface of the apparently unpromising story which I had just heard.

My next questions were now directed to the one object of ascertaining whether Mr. Catherick had or had not arrived truly at the conviction of his wife's misconduct. The answers I received from Mrs. Clements left me in no doubt whatever on that point. Mrs. Catherick had, on the clearest evidence, compromised her reputation, while a single woman, with some person unknown, and had married to save her character. It had been positively ascertained, by calculations of time and place into which I need not enter particularly, that the daughter who bore her husband's name was not her husband's child.

The next object of inquiry, whether it was equally certain that Sir Percival must have been the father of Anne, was beset by far greater difficulties. I was in no position to try the probabilities on one side or on the other in this instance by any better test than the test of personal resemblance.

"I suppose you often saw Sir Percival when he was in your village?" I said.

"Yes, sir, very often," replied Mrs. Clements.

"Did you ever observe that Anne was like him?"

"She was not at all like him, sir."

"Was she like her mother, then?"

"Not like her mother either, sir. Mrs. Catherick was dark, and full in the face."

Not like her mother and not like her (supposed) father. I knew that the test by personal resemblance was not to be implicitly trusted, but, on the other hand, it was not to be altogether rejected on that account. Was it possible to strengthen the evidence by discovering any conclusive facts in relation to the lives of Mrs. Catherick and Sir Percival before they either of them appeared at Old Welmingham? When I asked my next questions I put them with this view.

"When Sir Percival first arrived in your neighbourhood," I said, "did you hear where he had come from last?"

"No, sir. Some said from Blackwater Park, and some said from Scotland—but nobody knew."

"Was Mrs. Catherick living in service at Varneck Hall immediately before her marriage?"

"Yes, sir."

“And had she been long in her place?”

“Three or four years, sir; I am not quite certain which.”

“Did you ever hear the name of the gentleman to whom Varneck Hall belonged at that time?”

“Yes, sir. His name was Major Donthorne.”

“Did Mr. Catherick, or did any one else you knew, ever hear that Sir Percival was a friend of Major Donthorne’s, or ever see Sir Percival in the neighbourhood of Varneck Hall?”

“Catherick never did, sir, that I can remember—nor any one else either, that I know of.”

I noted down Major Donthorne’s name and address, on the chance that he might still be alive, and that it might be useful at some future time to apply to him. Meanwhile, the impression on my mind was now decidedly adverse to the opinion that Sir Percival was Anne’s father, and decidedly favourable to the conclusion that the secret of his stolen interviews with Mrs. Catherick was entirely unconnected with the disgrace which the woman had inflicted on her husband’s good name. I could think of no further inquiries which I might make to strengthen this impression—I could only encourage Mrs. Clements to speak next of Anne’s early days, and watch for any chance-suggestion which might in this way offer itself to me.

“I have not heard yet,” I said, “how the poor child, born in all this sin and misery, came to be trusted, Mrs. Clements, to your care.”

“There was nobody else, sir, to take the little helpless creature in hand,” replied Mrs. Clements. “The wicked mother seemed to hate it—as if the poor baby was in fault!—from the day it was born. My heart was heavy for the child, and I made the offer to bring it up as tenderly as if it was my own.”

“Did Anne remain entirely under your care from that time?”

“Not quite entirely, sir. Mrs. Catherick had her whims and fancies about it at times, and used now and then to lay claim to the child, as if she wanted to spite me for bringing it up. But these fits of hers never lasted for long. Poor little Anne was always returned to me, and was always glad to get back—though she led but a gloomy life in my house, having no playmates, like other children, to brighten her up. Our longest separation was when her mother took her to Limmeridge. Just at that time I lost my husband, and I felt it was as well, in that miserable affliction, that Anne should not be in the house. She was between ten and eleven years old then, slow at her lessons, poor soul, and not so cheerful as other children—but as pretty a little girl to look at as you would wish to see. I waited at home till her mother brought her back, and then I made the offer to take her with me to London—the truth being, sir, that I could not find it in my heart to stop at Old Welmingham after my husband’s death, the place was so changed and so dismal to me.”

“And did Mrs. Catherick consent to your proposal?”

“No, sir. She came back from the north harder and bitterer than ever. Folks did say that she had been obliged to ask Sir Percival’s leave to go, to begin with; and that she only went to nurse her dying sister at Limmeridge because the poor woman was reported to have saved money—the truth being that she hardly left enough to bury her. These things may have soured Mrs. Catherick likely enough, but however that may be, she wouldn’t hear of my taking the child away. She seemed to like distressing us both by parting us. All I could do was to give Anne my direction, and to tell her privately, if she was ever in trouble, to come to me. But years passed before she was free to come. I never saw her again, poor soul, till the night she escaped from the mad-house.”

“You know, Mrs. Clements, why Sir Percival Glyde shut her up?”

“I only know what Anne herself told me, sir. The poor thing used to ramble and wander about it sadly. She said her mother had got some secret of Sir Percival’s to keep, and had let it out to her long after I left Hampshire—and when Sir Percival found she knew it, he shut her up. But she never could say what it was when I asked her. All she could tell me was, that her mother might be the ruin and destruction of Sir Percival if she chose. Mrs. Catherick may have let out just as much as that, and no more. I’m next to certain I should have heard the whole truth from Anne, if she had really known it as she pretended to do, and as she very likely fancied she did, poor soul.”

This idea had more than once occurred to my own mind. I had already told Marian that I doubted whether Laura was really on the point of making any important discovery when she and Anne Catherick were disturbed by Count Fosco at the boat-house. It was perfectly in character with Anne’s mental affliction that she should assume an absolute knowledge of the secret on no better grounds than vague suspicion, derived from hints which her mother had incautiously let drop in her presence. Sir Percival’s guilty distrust would, in that case, infallibly inspire him with the false idea that Anne knew all from her mother, just as it had afterwards fixed in his mind the equally false suspicion that his wife knew all from Anne.

The time was passing, the morning was wearing away. It was doubtful, if I stayed longer, whether I should hear anything more from Mrs. Clements that would be at all useful to my purpose. I had already discovered those local and family particulars, in relation to Mrs. Catherick, of which I had been in search, and I had arrived at certain conclusions, entirely new to me, which might immensely assist in directing the course of my future proceedings. I rose to take my leave, and to thank Mrs. Clements for the friendly readiness she had shown in affording me information.

“I am afraid you must have thought me very inquisitive,” I said. “I have troubled you with more questions than many people would have cared to answer.”

“You are heartily welcome, sir, to anything I can tell you,” answered Mrs. Clements. She stopped and looked at me wistfully. “But I do wish,” said the poor woman, “you could have told me a little more about Anne, sir. I thought I saw something in your face when you came in which looked as if you could. You can’t think how hard it is not even to know whether she is living or dead. I could bear it better if I was only certain. You said you never expected we should see her alive again. Do you know, sir— do you know for truth—that it has pleased God to take her?”

I was not proof against this appeal, it would have been unspeakably mean and cruel of me if I had resisted it.

“I am afraid there is no doubt of the truth,” I answered gently; “I have the certainty in my own mind that her troubles in this world are over.”

The poor woman dropped into her chair and hid her face from me. “Oh, sir,” she said, “how do you know it? Who can have told you?”

“No one has told me, Mrs. Clements. But I have reasons for feeling sure of it—reasons which I promise you shall know as soon as I can safely explain them. I am certain she was not neglected in her last moments—I am certain the heart complaint from which she suffered so sadly was the true cause of her death. You shall feel as sure of this as I do, soon—you shall know, before long, that she is buried in a quiet country churchyard—in a pretty, peaceful place, which you might have chosen for her yourself.”

“Dead!” said Mrs. Clements, “dead so young, and I am left to hear it! I made her first short frocks. I taught her to walk. The first time she ever said Mother she said it to me—and now I am left and Anne is taken! Did you say, sir,” said the poor woman, removing the handkerchief from

her face, and looking up at me for the first time, "did you say that she had been nicely buried? Was it the sort of funeral she might have had if she had really been my own child?"

I assured her that it was. She seemed to take an inexplicable pride in my answer—to find a comfort in it which no other and higher considerations could afford. "It would have broken my heart," she said simply, "if Anne had not been nicely buried—but how do you know it, sir? who told you?" I once more entreated her to wait until I could speak to her unreservedly. "You are sure to see me again," I said, "for I have a favour to ask when you are a little more composed—perhaps in a day or two."

"Don't keep it waiting, sir, on my account," said Mrs. Clements. "Never mind my crying if I can be of use. If you have anything on your mind to say to me, sir, please to say it now."

"I only wish to ask you one last question," I said. "I only want to know Mrs. Catherick's address at Welmingham."

My request so startled Mrs. Clements, that, for the moment, even the tidings of Anne's death seemed to be driven from her mind. Her tears suddenly ceased to flow, and she sat looking at me in blank amazement.

"For the Lord's sake, sir!" she said, "what do you want with Mrs. Catherick!"

"I want this, Mrs. Clements," I replied, "I want to know the secret of those private meetings of hers with Sir Percival Glyde. There is something more in what you have told me of that woman's past conduct, and of that man's past relations with her, than you or any of your neighbours ever suspected. There is a secret we none of us know between those two, and I am going to Mrs. Catherick with the resolution to find it out."

"Think twice about it, sir!" said Mrs. Clements, rising in her earnestness and laying her hand on my arm. "She's an awful woman—you don't know her as I do. Think twice about it."

"I am sure your warning is kindly meant, Mrs. Clements. But I am determined to see the woman, whatever comes of it."

Mrs. Clements looked me anxiously in the face.

"I see your mind is made up, sir," she said. "I will give you the address."

I wrote it down in my pocket-book and then took her hand to say farewell.

"You shall hear from me soon," I said; "you shall know all that I have promised to tell you."

Mrs. Clements sighed and shook her head doubtfully.

"An old woman's advice is sometimes worth taking, sir," she said. "Think twice before you go to Welmingham."

## VIII

When I reached home again after my interview with Mrs. Clements, I was struck by the appearance of a change in Laura.

The unvarying gentleness and patience which long misfortune had tried so cruelly and had never conquered yet, seemed now to have suddenly failed her. Insensible to all Marian's attempts to soothe and amuse her, she sat, with her neglected drawing pushed away on the table, her eyes resolutely cast down, her fingers twining and untwining themselves restlessly in her lap. Marian rose when I came in, with a silent distress in her face, waited for a moment to see if Laura would look up at my approach, whispered to me, "Try if you can rouse her," and left the room.

I sat down in the vacant chair—gently unclasped the poor, worn, restless fingers, and took both her hands in mine.

“What are you thinking of, Laura? Tell me, my darling—try and tell me what it is.”

She struggled with herself, and raised her eyes to mine. “I can’t feel happy,” she said, “I can’t help thinking——” She stopped, bent forward a little, and laid her head on my shoulder, with a terrible mute helplessness that struck me to the heart.

“Try to tell me,” I repeated gently; “try to tell me why you are not happy.”

“I am so useless—I am such a burden on both of you,” she answered, with a weary, hopeless sigh. “You work and get money, Walter, and Marian helps you. Why is there nothing I can do? You will end in liking Marian better than you like me—you will, because I am so helpless! Oh, don’t, don’t, don’t treat me like a child!”

I raised her head, and smoothed away the tangled hair that fell over her face, and kissed her—my poor, faded flower! my lost, afflicted sister! “You shall help us, Laura,” I said, “you shall begin, my darling, to-day.”

She looked at me with a feverish eagerness, with a breathless interest, that made me tremble for the new life of hope which I had called into being by those few words.

I rose, and set her drawing materials in order, and placed them near her again.

“You know that I work and get money by drawing,” I said. “Now you have taken such pains, now you are so much improved, you shall begin to work and get money too. Try to finish this little sketch as nicely and prettily as you can. When it is done I will take it away with me, and the same person will buy it who buys all that I do. You shall keep your own earnings in your own purse, and Marian shall come to you to help us, as often as she comes to me. Think how useful you are going to make yourself to both of us, and you will soon be as happy, Laura, as the day is long.”

Her face grew eager, and brightened into a smile. In the moment while it lasted, in the moment when she again took up the pencils that had been laid aside, she almost looked like the Laura of past days.

I had rightly interpreted the first signs of a new growth and strength in her mind, unconsciously expressing themselves in the notice she had taken of the occupations which filled her sister’s life and mine. Marian (when I told her what had passed) saw, as I saw, that she was longing to assume her own little position of importance, to raise herself in her own estimation and in ours—and, from that day, we tenderly helped the new ambition which gave promise of the hopeful, happier future, that might now not be far off. Her drawings, as she finished them, or tried to finish them, were placed in my hands. Marian took them from me and hid them carefully, and I set aside a little weekly tribute from my earnings, to be offered to her as the price paid by strangers for the poor, faint, valueless sketches, of which I was the only purchaser. It was hard sometimes to maintain our innocent deception, when she proudly brought out her purse to contribute her share towards the expenses, and wondered with serious interest, whether I or she had earned the most that week. I have all those hidden drawings in my possession still—they are my treasures beyond price—the dear remembrances that I love to keep alive—the friends in past adversity that my heart will never part from, my tenderness never forget.

Am I trifling, here, with the necessities of my task? am I looking forward to the happier time which my narrative has not yet reached? Yes. Back again—back to the days of doubt and dread, when the spirit within me struggled hard for its life, in the icy stillness of perpetual suspense. I have paused and rested for a while on my forward course. It is not, perhaps, time wasted, if the friends who read these pages have paused and rested too.

I took the first opportunity I could find of speaking to Marian in private, and of communicating to her the result of the inquiries which I had made that morning. She seemed to share the opinion on the subject of my proposed journey to Welmingham, which Mrs. Clements had already expressed to me.

“Surely, Walter,” she said, “you hardly know enough yet to give you any hope of claiming Mrs. Catherick’s confidence? Is it wise to proceed to these extremities, before you have really exhausted all safer and simpler means of attaining your object? When you told me that Sir Percival and the Count were the only two people in existence who knew the exact date of Laura’s journey, you forgot, and I forgot, that there was a third person who must surely know it—I mean Mrs. Rubelle. Would it not be far easier, and far less dangerous, to insist on a confession from her, than to force it from Sir Percival?”

“It might be easier,” I replied, “but we are not aware of the full extent of Mrs. Rubelle’s connivance and interest in the conspiracy, and we are therefore not certain that the date has been impressed on her mind, as it has been assuredly impressed on the minds of Sir Percival and the Count. It is too late, now, to waste the time on Mrs. Rubelle, which may be all-important to the discovery of the one assailable point in Sir Percival’s life? Are you thinking a little too seriously, Marian, of the risk I may run in returning to Hampshire? Are you beginning to doubt whether Sir Percival Glyde may not in the end be more than a match for me?”

“He will not be more than your match,” she replied decidedly, “because he will not be helped in resisting you by the impenetrable wickedness of the Count.”

“What has led you to that conclusion?” I replied, in some surprise.

“My own knowledge of Sir Percival’s obstinacy and impatience of the Count’s control,” she answered. “I believe he will insist on meeting you single-handed—just as he insisted at first on acting for himself at Blackwater Park. The time for suspecting the Count’s interference will be the time when you have Sir Percival at your mercy. His own interests will then be directly threatened, and he will act, Walter, to terrible purpose in his own defence.”

“We may deprive him of his weapons beforehand,” I said. “Some of the particulars I have heard from Mrs. Clements may yet be turned to account against him, and other means of strengthening the case may be at our disposal. There are passages in Mrs. Michelson’s narrative which show that the Count found it necessary to place himself in communication with Mr. Fairlie, and there may be circumstances which compromise him in that proceeding. While I am away, Marian, write to Mr. Fairlie and say that you want an answer describing exactly what passed between the Count and himself, and informing you also of any particulars that may have come to his knowledge at the same time in connection with his niece. Tell him that the statement you request will, sooner or later, be insisted on, if he shows any reluctance to furnish you with it of his own accord.”

“The letter shall be written, Walter. But are you really determined to go to Welmingham?”

“Absolutely determined. I will devote the next two days to earning what we want for the week to come, and on the third day I go to Hampshire.”

When the third day came I was ready for my journey.

As it was possible that I might be absent for some little time, I arranged with Marian that we were to correspond every day—of course addressing each other by assumed names, for caution’s sake. As long as I heard from her regularly, I should assume that nothing was wrong. But if the morning came and brought me no letter, my return to London would take place, as a matter of course, by the first train. I contrived to reconcile Laura to my departure by telling her that I was

going to the country to find new purchasers for her drawings and for mine, and I left her occupied and happy. Marian followed me downstairs to the street door.

“Remember what anxious hearts you leave here,” she whispered, as we stood together in the passage. “Remember all the hopes that hang on your safe return. If strange things happen to you on this journey—if you and Sir Percival meet——”

“What makes you think we shall meet?” I asked.

“I don’t know—I have fears and fancies that I cannot account for. Laugh at them, Walter, if you like—but, for God’s sake, keep your temper if you come in contact with that man!”

“Never fear, Marian! I answer for my self-control.”

With those words we parted.

I walked briskly to the station. There was a glow of hope in me. There was a growing conviction in my mind that my journey this time would not be taken in vain. It was a fine, clear, cold morning. My nerves were firmly strung, and I felt all the strength of my resolution stirring in me vigorously from head to foot.

As I crossed the railway platform, and looked right and left among the people congregated on it, to search for any faces among them that I knew, the doubt occurred to me whether it might not have been to my advantage if I had adopted a disguise before setting out for Hampshire. But there was something so repellent to me in the idea—something so meanly like the common herd of spies and informers in the mere act of adopting a disguise—that I dismissed the question from consideration almost as soon as it had risen in my mind. Even as a mere matter of expediency the proceeding was doubtful in the extreme. If I tried the experiment at home the landlord of the house would sooner or later discover me, and would have his suspicions aroused immediately. If I tried it away from home the same persons might see me, by the commonest accident, with the disguise and without it, and I should in that way be inviting the notice and distrust which it was my most pressing interest to avoid. In my own character I had acted thus far—and in my own character I was resolved to continue to the end.

The train left me at Welmingham early in the afternoon.

Is there any wilderness of sand in the deserts of Arabia, is there any prospect of desolation among the ruins of Palestine, which can rival the repelling effect on the eye, and the depressing influence on the mind, of an English country town in the first stage of its existence, and in the transition state of its prosperity? I asked myself that question as I passed through the clean desolation, the neat ugliness, the prim torpor of the streets of Welmingham. And the tradesmen who stared after me from their lonely shops—the trees that drooped helpless in their arid exile of unfinished crescents and squares—the dead house- carcasses that waited in vain for the vivifying human element to animate them with the breath of life—every creature that I saw, every object that I passed, seemed to answer with one accord: The deserts of Arabia are innocent of our civilised desolation—the ruins of Palestine are incapable of our modern gloom!

I inquired my way to the quarter of the town in which Mrs. Catherick lived, and on reaching it found myself in a square of small houses, one story high. There was a bare little plot of grass in the middle, protected by a cheap wire fence. An elderly nursemaid and two children were standing in a corner of the enclosure, looking at a lean goat tethered to the grass. Two foot-passengers were talking together on one side of the pavement before the houses, and an idle little boy was leading an idle little dog along by a string on the other. I heard the dull tinkling of a piano at a distance, accompanied by the intermittent knocking of a hammer nearer at hand. These were all the sights and sounds of life that encountered me when I entered the square.

I walked at once to the door of Number Thirteen—the number of Mrs. Catherick’s house—and knocked, without waiting to consider beforehand how I might best present myself when I got in. The first necessity was to see Mrs. Catherick. I could then judge, from my own observation, of the safest and easiest manner of approaching the object of my visit.

The door was opened by a melancholy middle-aged woman servant. I gave her my card, and asked if I could see Mrs. Catherick. The card was taken into the front parlour, and the servant returned with a message requesting me to mention what my business was.

“Say, if you please, that my business relates to Mrs. Catherick’s daughter,” I replied. This was the best pretext I could think of, on the spur of the moment, to account for my visit.

The servant again retired to the parlour, again returned, and this time begged me, with a look of gloomy amazement, to walk in.

I entered a little room, with a flaring paper of the largest pattern on the walls. Chairs, tables, cheffonier, and sofa, all gleamed with the glutinous brightness of cheap upholstery. On the largest table, in the middle of the room, stood a smart Bible, placed exactly in the centre on a red and yellow woollen mat and at the side of the table nearest to the window, with a little knitting-basket on her lap, and a wheezing, blear-eyed old spaniel crouched at her feet, there sat an elderly woman, wearing a black net cap and a black silk gown, and having slate-coloured mittens on her hands. Her iron-grey hair hung in heavy bands on either side of her face—her dark eyes looked straight forward, with a hard, defiant, implacable stare. She had full square cheeks, a long, firm chin, and thick, sensual, colourless lips. Her figure was stout and sturdy, and her manner aggressively self-possessed. This was Mrs. Catherick.

“You have come to speak to me about my daughter,” she said, before I could utter a word on my side. “Be so good as to mention what you have to say.”

The tone of her voice was as hard, as defiant, as implacable as the expression of her eyes. She pointed to a chair, and looked me all over attentively, from head to foot, as I sat down in it. I saw that my only chance with this woman was to speak to her in her own tone, and to meet her, at the outset of our interview, on her own ground.

“You are aware,” I said, “that your daughter has been lost?”

“I am perfectly aware of it.”

“Have you felt any apprehension that the misfortune of her loss might be followed by the misfortune of her death?”

“Yes. Have you come here to tell me she is dead?”

“I have.”

“Why?”

She put that extraordinary question without the slightest change in her voice, her face, or her manner. She could not have appeared more perfectly unconcerned if I had told her of the death of the goat in the enclosure outside.

“Why?” I repeated. “Do you ask why I come here to tell you of your daughter’s death?”

“Yes. What interest have you in me, or in her? How do you come to know anything about my daughter?”

“In this way. I met her on the night when she escaped from the Asylum, and I assisted her in reaching a place of safety.”

“You did very wrong.”

“I am sorry to hear her mother say so.”

“Her mother does say so. How do you know she is dead?”

“I am not at liberty to say how I know it—but I DO know it.”

“Are you at liberty to say how you found out my address?”

“Certainly. I got your address from Mrs. Clements.”

“Mrs. Clements is a foolish woman. Did she tell you to come here?”

“She did not.”

“Then, I ask you again, why did you come?”

As she was determined to have her answer, I gave it to her in the plainest possible form.

“I came,” I said, “because I thought Anne Catherick’s mother might have some natural interest in knowing whether she was alive or dead.”

“Just so,” said Mrs. Catherick, with additional self-possession. “Had you no other motive?”

I hesitated. The right answer to that question was not easy to find at a moment’s notice.

“If you have no other motive,” she went on, deliberately taking off her slate-coloured mittens, and rolling them up, “I have only to thank you for your visit, and to say that I will not detain you here any longer. Your information would be more satisfactory if you were willing to explain how you became possessed of it. However, it justifies me, I suppose, in going into mourning. There is not much alteration necessary in my dress, as you see. When I have changed my mittens, I shall be all in black.”

She searched in the pocket of her gown, drew out a pair of black lace mittens, put them on with the stoniest and steadiest composure, and then quietly crossed her hands in her lap.

“I wish you good morning,” she said.

The cool contempt of her manner irritated me into directly avowing that the purpose of my visit had not been answered yet.

“I HAVE another motive in coming here,” I said.

“Ah! I thought so,” remarked Mrs. Catherick.

“Your daughter’s death——”

“What did she die of?”

“Of disease of the heart.”

“Yes. Go on.”

“Your daughter’s death has been made the pretext for inflicting serious injury on a person who is very dear to me. Two men have been concerned, to my certain knowledge, in doing that wrong. One of them is Sir Percival Glyde.”

“Indeed!”

I looked attentively to see if she flinched at the sudden mention of that name. Not a muscle of her stirred—the hard, defiant, implacable stare in her eyes never wavered for an instant.

“You may wonder,” I went on, “how the event of your daughter’s death can have been made the means of inflicting injury on another person.”

“No,” said Mrs. Catherick; “I don’t wonder at all. This appears to be your affair. You are interested in my affairs. I am not interested in yours.”

“You may ask, then,” I persisted, “why I mention the matter in your presence.”

“Yes, I DO ask that.”

“I mention it because I am determined to bring Sir Percival Glyde to account for the wickedness he has committed.”

“What have I to do with your determination?”

“You shall hear. There are certain events in Sir Percival’s past life which it is necessary for my purpose to be fully acquainted with. YOU know them—and for that reason I come to YOU.”

“What events do you mean?”

“Events that occurred at Old Welmingham when your husband was parish-clerk at that place, and before the time when your daughter was born.”

I had reached the woman at last through the barrier of impenetrable reserve that she had tried to set up between us. I saw her temper smouldering in her eyes—as plainly as I saw her hands grow restless, then unclasp themselves, and begin mechanically smoothing her dress over her knees.

“What do you know of those events?” she asked.

“All that Mrs. Clements could tell me,” I answered.

There was a momentary flush on her firm square face, a momentary stillness in her restless hands, which seemed to betoken a coming outburst of anger that might throw her off her guard. But no—she mastered the rising irritation, leaned back in her chair, crossed her arms on her broad bosom, and with a smile of grim sarcasm on her thick lips, looked at me as steadily as ever.

“Ah! I begin to understand it all now,” she said, her tamed and disciplined anger only expressing itself in the elaborate mockery of her tone and manner. “You have got a grudge of your own against Sir Percival Glyde, and I must help you to wreak it. I must tell you this, that, and the other about Sir Percival and myself, must I? Yes, indeed? You have been prying into my private affairs. You think you have found a lost woman to deal with, who lives here on sufferance, and who will do anything you ask for fear you may injure her in the opinions of the town’s-people. I see through you and your precious speculation—I do! and it amuses me. Ha! ha!”

She stopped for a moment, her arms tightened over her bosom, and she laughed to herself—a hard, harsh, angry laugh.

“You don’t know how I have lived in this place, and what I have done in this place, Mr. What’s-your-name,” she went on. “I’ll tell you, before I ring the bell and have you shown out. I came here a wronged woman—I came here robbed of my character and determined to claim it back. I’ve been years and years about it—and I HAVE claimed it back. I have matched the respectable people fairly and openly on their own ground. If they say anything against me now they must say it in secret—they can’t say it, they daren’t say it, openly. I stand high enough in this town to be out of your reach. THE CLERGYMAN BOWS TO ME. Aha! you didn’t bargain for that when you came here. Go to the church and inquire about me—you will find Mrs. Catherick has her sitting like the rest of them, and pays the rent on the day it’s due. Go to the town-hall. There’s a petition lying there—a petition of the respectable inhabitants against allowing a circus to come and perform here and corrupt our morals—yes! OUR morals. I signed that petition this morning. Go to the bookseller’s shop. The clergyman’s Wednesday evening Lectures on Justification by Faith are publishing there by subscription—I’m down on the list. The doctor’s wife only put a shilling in the plate at our last charity sermon—I put half-a-crown. Mr. Churchwarden Soward held the plate, and bowed to me. Ten years ago he told Pigrum the chemist I ought to be whipped out of the town at the cart’s tail. Is your mother alive? Has she got a better Bible on her table than I have got on mine? Does she stand better with her trades-people than I do with mine? Has she always lived within her income? I have always lived within mine. Ah! there IS the clergyman coming along the square. Look, Mr. What’s-your-name—look, if you please!”

She started up with the activity of a young woman, went to the window, waited till the clergyman passed, and bowed to him solemnly. The clergyman ceremoniously raised his hat, and

walked on. Mrs. Catherick returned to her chair, and looked at me with a grimmer sarcasm than ever.

“There!” she said. “What do you think of that for a woman with a lost character? How does your speculation look now?”

The singular manner in which she had chosen to assert herself, the extraordinary practical vindication of her position in the town which she had just offered, had so perplexed me that I listened to her in silent surprise. I was not the less resolved, however, to make another effort to throw her off her guard. If the woman’s fierce temper once got beyond her control, and once flamed out on me, she might yet say the words which would put the clue in my hands.

“How does your speculation look now?” she repeated.

“Exactly as it looked when I first came in,” I answered. “I don’t doubt the position you have gained in the town, and I don’t wish to assail it even if I could. I came here because Sir Percival Glyde is, to my certain knowledge, your enemy, as well as mine. If I have a grudge against him, you have a grudge against him too. You may deny it if you like, you may distrust me as much as you please, you may be as angry as you will—but, of all the women in England, you, if you have any sense of injury, are the woman who ought to help me to crush that man.”

“Crush him for yourself,” she said; “then come back here, and see what I say to you.”

She spoke those words as she had not spoken yet, quickly, fiercely, vindictively. I had stirred in its lair the serpent-hatred of years, but only for a moment. Like a lurking reptile it leaped up at me as she eagerly bent forward towards the place in which I was sitting. Like a lurking reptile it dropped out of sight again as she instantly resumed her former position in the chair.

“You won’t trust me?” I said.

“No.”

“You are afraid?”

“Do I look as if I was?”

“You are afraid of Sir Percival Glyde?”

“Am I?”

Her colour was rising, and her hands were at work again smoothing her gown. I pressed the point farther and farther home, I went on without allowing her a moment of delay.

“Sir Percival has a high position in the world,” I said; “it would be no wonder if you were afraid of him. Sir Percival is a powerful man, a baronet, the possessor of a fine estate, the descendant of a great family——”

She amazed me beyond expression by suddenly bursting out laughing.

“Yes,” she repeated, in tones of the bitterest, steadiest contempt. “A baronet, the possessor of a fine estate, the descendant of a great family. Yes, indeed! A great family— especially by the mother’s side.”

There was no time to reflect on the words that had just escaped her, there was only time to feel that they were well worth thinking over the moment I left the house.

“I am not here to dispute with you about family questions,” I said. “I know nothing of Sir Percival’s mother——”

“And you know as little of Sir Percival himself,” she interposed sharply.

“I advise you not to be too sure of that,” I rejoined. “I know some things about him, and I suspect many more.”

“What do you suspect?”

“I’ll tell you what I DON’T suspect. I DON’T suspect him of being Anne’s father.”

She started to her feet, and came close up to me with a look of fury.

“How dare you talk to me about Anne’s father! How dare you say who was her father, or who wasn’t!” she broke out, her face quivering, her voice trembling with passion.

“The secret between you and Sir Percival is not THAT secret,” I persisted. “The mystery which darkens Sir Percival’s life was not born with your daughter’s birth, and has not died with your daughter’s death.”

She drew back a step. “Go!” she said, and pointed sternly to the door.

“There was no thought of the child in your heart or in his,” I went on, determined to press her back to her last defences. “There was no bond of guilty love between you and him when you held those stolen meetings, when your husband found you whispering together under the vestry of the church.”

Her pointing hand instantly dropped to her side, and the deep flush of anger faded from her face while I spoke. I saw the change pass over her—I saw that hard, firm, fearless, self-possessed woman quail under a terror which her utmost resolution was not strong enough to resist when I said those five last words, “the vestry of the church.”

For a minute or more we stood looking at each other in silence. I spoke first.

“Do you still refuse to trust me?” I asked.

She could not call the colour that had left it back to her face, but she had steadied her voice, she had recovered the defiant self-possession of her manner when she answered me.

“I do refuse,” she said.

“Do you still tell me to go?”

“Yes. Go—and never come back.”

I walked to the door, waited a moment before I opened it, and turned round to look at her again.

“I may have news to bring you of Sir Percival which you don’t expect,” I said, “and in that case I shall come back.”

“There is no news of Sir Percival that I don’t expect, except——”

She stopped, her pale face darkened, and she stole back with a quiet, stealthy, cat-like step to her chair.

“Except the news of his death,” she said, sitting down again, with the mockery of a smile just hovering on her cruel lips, and the furtive light of hatred lurking deep in her steady eyes.

As I opened the door of the room to go out, she looked round at me quickly. The cruel smile slowly widened her lips—she eyed me, with a strange stealthy interest, from head to foot—an unutterable expectation showed itself wickedly all over her face. Was she speculating, in the secrecy of her own heart, on my youth and strength, on the force of my sense of injury and the limits of my self-control, and was she considering the lengths to which they might carry me, if Sir Percival and I ever chanced to meet? The bare doubt that it might be so drove me from her presence, and silenced even the common forms of farewell on my lips. Without a word more, on my side or on hers, I left the room.

As I opened the outer door, I saw the same clergyman who had already passed the house once, about to pass it again, on his way back through the square. I waited on the door-step to let him go by, and looked round, as I did so, at the parlour window.

Mrs. Catherick had heard his footsteps approaching, in the silence of that lonely place, and she was on her feet at the window again, waiting for him. Not all the strength of all the terrible passions I had roused in that woman’s heart, could loosen her desperate hold on the one fragment of social consideration which years of resolute effort had just dragged within her grasp. There she was again, not a minute after I had left her, placed purposely in a position which made it a

matter of common courtesy on the part of the clergyman to bow to her for a second time. He raised his hat once more. I saw the hard ghastly face behind the window soften, and light up with gratified pride—I saw the head with the grim black cap bend ceremoniously in return. The clergyman had bowed to her, and in my presence, twice in one day!

## IX

I left the house, feeling that Mrs. Catherick had helped me a step forward, in spite of herself. Before I had reached the turning which led out of the square, my attention was suddenly aroused by the sound of a closing door behind me.

I looked round, and saw an undersized man in black on the door-step of a house, which, as well as I could judge, stood next to Mrs. Catherick's place of abode—next to it, on the side nearest to me. The man did not hesitate a moment about the direction he should take. He advanced rapidly towards the turning at which I had stopped. I recognised him as the lawyer's clerk, who had preceded me in my visit to Blackwater Park, and who had tried to pick a quarrel with me, when I asked him if I could see the house.

I waited where I was, to ascertain whether his object was to come to close quarters and speak on this occasion. To my surprise he passed on rapidly, without saying a word, without even looking up in my face as he went by. This was such a complete inversion of the course of proceeding which I had every reason to expect on his part, that my curiosity, or rather my suspicion, was aroused, and I determined on my side to keep him cautiously in view, and to discover what the business might be in which he was now employed. Without caring whether he saw me or not, I walked after him. He never looked back, and he led me straight through the streets to the railway station.

The train was on the point of starting, and two or three passengers who were late were clustering round the small opening through which the tickets were issued. I joined them, and distinctly heard the lawyer's clerk demand a ticket for the Blackwater station. I satisfied myself that he had actually left by the train before I came away.

There was only one interpretation that I could place on what I had just seen and heard. I had unquestionably observed the man leaving a house which closely adjoined Mrs. Catherick's residence. He had been probably placed there, by Sir Percival's directions, as a lodger, in anticipation of my inquiries leading me, sooner or later, to communicate with Mrs. Catherick. He had doubtless seen me go in and come out, and he had hurried away by the first train to make his report at Blackwater Park, to which place Sir Percival would naturally betake himself (knowing what he evidently knew of my movements), in order to be ready on the spot, if I returned to Hampshire. Before many days were over, there seemed every likelihood now that he and I might meet.

Whatever result events might be destined to produce, I resolved to pursue my own course, straight to the end in view, without stopping or turning aside for Sir Percival or for any one. The great responsibility which weighed on me heavily in London—the responsibility of so guiding my slightest actions as to prevent them from leading accidentally to the discovery of Laura's place of refuge—was removed, now that I was in Hampshire. I could go and come as I pleased at Welmingham, and if I chanced to fail in observing any necessary precautions, the immediate results, at least, would affect no one but myself.

When I left the station the winter evening was beginning to close in. There was little hope of continuing my inquiries after dark to any useful purpose in a neighbourhood that was strange to me. Accordingly, I made my way to the nearest hotel, and ordered my dinner and my bed. This done, I wrote to Marian, to tell her that I was safe and well, and that I had fair prospects of success. I had directed her, on leaving home, to address the first letter she wrote to me (the letter I expected to receive the next morning) to "The Post-Office, Welmingham," and I now begged her to send her second day's letter to the same address.

I could easily receive it by writing to the postmaster if I happened to be away from the town when it arrived.

The coffee-room of the hotel, as it grew late in the evening, became a perfect solitude. I was left to reflect on what I had accomplished that afternoon as uninterruptedly as if the house had been my own. Before I retired to rest I had attentively thought over my extraordinary interview with Mrs. Catherick from beginning to end, and had verified at my leisure the conclusions which I had hastily drawn in the earlier part of the day.

The vestry of Old Welmingham church was the starting-point from which my mind slowly worked its way back through all that I had heard Mrs. Catherick say, and through all I had seen Mrs. Catherick do.

At the time when the neighbourhood of the vestry was first referred to in my presence by Mrs. Clements, I had thought it the strangest and most unaccountable of all places for Sir Percival to select for a clandestine meeting with the clerk's wife. Influenced by this impression, and by no other, I had mentioned "the vestry of the church" before Mrs. Catherick on pure speculation—it represented one of the minor peculiarities of the story which occurred to me while I was speaking. I was prepared for her answering me confusedly or angrily, but the blank terror that seized her when I said the words took me completely by surprise. I had long before associated Sir Percival's Secret with the concealment of a serious crime which Mrs. Catherick knew of, but I had gone no further than this. Now the woman's paroxysm of terror associated the crime, either directly or indirectly, with the vestry, and convinced me that she had been more than the mere witness of it—she was also the accomplice, beyond a doubt.

What had been the nature of the crime? Surely there was a contemptible side to it, as well as a dangerous side, or Mrs. Catherick would not have repeated my own words, referring to Sir Percival's rank and power, with such marked disdain as she had certainly displayed. It was a contemptible crime then and a dangerous crime, and she had shared in it, and it was associated with the vestry of the church.

The next consideration to be disposed of led me a step farther from this point.

Mrs. Catherick's undisguised contempt for Sir Percival plainly extended to his mother as well. She had referred with the bitterest sarcasm to the great family he had descended from—"especially by the mother's side." What did this mean? There appeared to be only two explanations of it. Either his mother's birth had been low, or his mother's reputation was damaged by some hidden flaw with which Mrs. Catherick and Sir Percival were both privately acquainted? I could only put the first explanation to the test by looking at the register of her marriage, and so ascertaining her maiden name and her parentage as a preliminary to further inquiries.

On the other hand, if the second case supposed were the true one, what had been the flaw in her reputation? Remembering the account which Marian had given me of Sir Percival's father and mother, and of the suspiciously unsocial secluded life they had both led, I now asked myself whether it might not be possible that his mother had never been married at all. Here again the

register might, by offering written evidence of the marriage, prove to me, at any rate, that this doubt had no foundation in truth. But where was the register to be found? At this point I took up the conclusions which I had previously formed, and the same mental process which had discovered the locality of the concealed crime, now lodged the register also in the vestry of Old Welmingham church.

These were the results of my interview with Mrs. Catherick—these were the various considerations, all steadily converging to one point, which decided the course of my proceedings on the next day.

The morning was cloudy and lowering, but no rain fell. I left my bag at the hotel to wait there till I called for it, and, after inquiring the way, set forth on foot for Old Welmingham church.

It was a walk of rather more than two miles, the ground rising slowly all the way.

On the highest point stood the church—an ancient, weather-beaten building, with heavy buttresses at its sides, and a clumsy square tower in front. The vestry at the back was built out from the church, and seemed to be of the same age. Round the building at intervals appeared the remains of the village which Mrs. Clements had described to me as her husband's place of abode in former years, and which the principal inhabitants had long since deserted for the new town. Some of the empty houses had been dismantled to their outer walls, some had been left to decay with time, and some were still inhabited by persons evidently of the poorest class. It was a dreary scene, and yet, in the worst aspect of its ruin, not so dreary as the modern town that I had just left. Here there was the brown, breezy sweep of surrounding fields for the eye to repose on—here the trees, leafless as they were, still varied the monotony of the prospect, and helped the mind to look forward to summer-time and shade.

As I moved away from the back of the church, and passed some of the dismantled cottages in search of a person who might direct me to the clerk, I saw two men saunter out after me from behind a wall. The tallest of the two—a stout muscular man in the dress of a gamekeeper—was a stranger to me. The other was one of the men who had followed me in London on the day when I left Mr. Kyrle's office. I had taken particular notice of him at the time; and I felt sure that I was not mistaken in identifying the fellow on this occasion.

Neither he nor his companion attempted to speak to me, and both kept themselves at a respectful distance, but the motive of their presence in the neighbourhood of the church was plainly apparent. It was exactly as I had supposed—Sir Percival was already prepared for me. My visit to Mrs. Catherick had been reported to him the evening before, and those two men had been placed on the look-out near the church in anticipation of my appearance at Old Welmingham. If I had wanted any further proof that my investigations had taken the right direction at last, the plan now adopted for watching me would have supplied it.

I walked on away from the church till I reached one of the inhabited houses, with a patch of kitchen garden attached to it on which a labourer was at work. He directed me to the clerk's abode, a cottage at some little distance off, standing by itself on the outskirts of the forsaken village. The clerk was indoors, and was just putting on his greatcoat. He was a cheerful, familiar, loudly-talkative old man, with a very poor opinion (as I soon discovered) of the place in which he lived, and a happy sense of superiority to his neighbours in virtue of the great personal distinction of having once been in London.

"It's well you came so early, sir," said the old man, when I had mentioned the object of my visit. "I should have been away in ten minutes more. Parish business, sir, and a goodish long trot

before it's all done for a man at my age. But, bless you, I'm strong on my legs still! As long as a man don't give at his legs, there's a deal of work left in him. Don't you think so yourself, sir?"

He took his keys down while he was talking from a hook behind the fireplace, and locked his cottage door behind us.

"Nobody at home to keep house for me," said the clerk, with a cheerful sense of perfect freedom from all family encumbrances. "My wife's in the churchyard there, and my children are all married. A wretched place this, isn't it, sir? But the parish is a large one—every man couldn't get through the business as I do. It's learning does it, and I've had my share, and a little more. I can talk the Queen's English (God bless the Queen!), and that's more than most of the people about here can do. You're from London, I suppose, sir? I've been in London a matter of five-and-twenty year ago. What's the news there now, if you please?"

Chattering on in this way, he led me back to the vestry. I looked about to see if the two spies were still in sight. They were not visible anywhere. After having discovered my application to the clerk, they had probably concealed themselves where they could watch my next proceedings in perfect freedom.

The vestry door was of stout old oak, studded with strong nails, and the clerk put his large heavy key into the lock with the air of a man who knew that he had a difficulty to encounter, and who was not quite certain of creditably conquering it.

"I'm obliged to bring you this way, sir," he said, "because the door from the vestry to the church is bolted on the vestry side. We might have got in through the church otherwise. This is a perverse lock, if ever there was one yet. It's big enough for a prison-door—it's been hampered over and over again, and it ought to be changed for a new one. I've mentioned that to the churchwarden fifty times over at least—he's always saying, 'I'll see about it'—and he never does see. Ah, It's a sort of lost corner, this place. Not like London—is it, sir? Bless you, we are all asleep here! We don't march with the times."

After some twisting and turning of the key, the heavy lock yielded, and he opened the door.

The vestry was larger than I should have supposed it to be, judging from the outside only. It was a dim, mouldy, melancholy old room, with a low, rafted ceiling. Round two sides of it, the sides nearest to the interior of the church, ran heavy wooden presses, worm-eaten and gaping with age. Hooked to the inner corner of one of these presses hung several surplices, all bulging out at their lower ends in an irreverent-looking bundle of limp drapery. Below the surplices, on the floor, stood three packing-cases, with the lids half off, half on, and the straw profusely bursting out of their cracks and crevices in every direction. Behind them, in a corner, was a litter of dusty papers, some large and rolled up like architects' plans, some loosely strung together on files like bills or letters. The room had once been lighted by a small side window, but this had been bricked up, and a lantern skylight was now substituted for it. The atmosphere of the place was heavy and mouldy, being rendered additionally oppressive by the closing of the door which led into the church. This door also was composed of solid oak, and was bolted at the top and bottom on the vestry side.

"We might be tidier, mightn't we, sir?" said the cheerful clerk; "but when you're in a lost corner of a place like this, what are you to do? Why, look here now, just look at these packing-cases. There they've been, for a year or more, ready to go down to London—there they are, littering the place, and there they'll stop as long as the nails hold them together. I'll tell you what, sir, as I said before, this is not London. We are all asleep here. Bless you, WE don't march with the times!"

"What is there in the packing-cases?" I asked.

“Bits of old wood carvings from the pulpit, and panels from the chancel, and images from the organ-loft,” said the clerk. “Portraits of the twelve apostles in wood, and not a whole nose among ‘em. All broken, and worm-eaten, and crumbling to dust at the edges. As brittle as crockery, sir, and as old as the church, if not older.”

“And why were they going to London? To be repaired?”

“That’s it, sir, to be repaired, and where they were past repair, to be copied in sound wood. But, bless you, the money fell short, and there they are, waiting for new subscriptions, and nobody to subscribe. It was all done a year ago, sir. Six gentlemen dined together about it, at the hotel in the new town. They made speeches, and passed resolutions, and put their names down, and printed off thousands of prospectuses. Beautiful prospectuses, sir, all flourished over with Gothic devices in red ink, saying it was a disgrace not to restore the church and repair the famous carvings, and so on. There are the prospectuses that couldn’t be distributed, and the architect’s plans and estimates, and the whole correspondence which set everybody at loggerheads and ended in a dispute, all down together in that corner, behind the packing-cases. The money dribbled in a little at first—but what CAN you expect out of London? There was just enough, you know, to pack the broken carvings, and get the estimates, and pay the printer’s bill, and after that there wasn’t a halfpenny left. There the things are, as I said before. We have nowhere else to put them—nobody in the new town cares about accommodating us—we’re in a lost corner—and this is an untidy vestry—and who’s to help it?—that’s what I want to know.”

My anxiety to examine the register did not dispose me to offer much encouragement to the old man’s talkativeness. I agreed with him that nobody could help the untidiness of the vestry, and then suggested that we should proceed to our business without more delay.

“Ay, ay, the marriage-register, to be sure,” said the clerk, taking a little bunch of keys from his pocket. “How far do you want to look back, sir?”

Marian had informed me of Sir Percival’s age at the time when we had spoken together of his marriage engagement with Laura. She had then described him as being forty-five years old. Calculating back from this, and making due allowance for the year that had passed since I had gained my information, I found that he must have been born in eighteen hundred and four, and that I might safely start on my search through the register from that date.

“I want to begin with the year eighteen hundred and four,” I said.

“Which way after that, sir?” asked the clerk. “Forwards to our time or backwards away from us?”

“Backwards from eighteen hundred and four.”

He opened the door of one of the presses—the press from the side of which the surplices were hanging—and produced a large volume bound in greasy brown leather. I was struck by the insecurity of the place in which the register was kept. The door of the press was warped and cracked with age, and the lock was of the smallest and commonest kind. I could have forced it easily with the walking-stick I carried in my hand.

“Is that considered a sufficiently secure place for the register?” I inquired. “Surely a book of such importance as this ought to be protected by a better lock, and kept carefully in an iron safe?”

“Well, now, that’s curious!” said the clerk, shutting up the book again, just after he had opened it, and smacking his hand cheerfully on the cover. “Those were the very words my old master was always saying years and years ago, when I was a lad. ‘Why isn’t the register’ (meaning this register here, under my hand)— ‘why isn’t it kept in an iron safe?’ If I’ve heard him say that once, I’ve heard him say it a hundred times. He was the solicitor in those days, sir, who had the

appointment of vestry-clerk to this church. A fine hearty old gentleman, and the most particular man breathing. As long as he lived he kept a copy of this book in his office at Knowlesbury, and had it posted up regular, from time to time, to correspond with the fresh entries here. You would hardly think it, but he had his own appointed days, once or twice in every quarter, for riding over to this church on his old white pony, to check the copy, by the register, with his own eyes and hands. 'How do I know?' (he used to say) 'how do I know that the register in this vestry may not be stolen or destroyed? Why isn't it kept in an iron safe? Why can't I make other people as careful as I am myself? Some of these days there will be an accident happen, and when the register's lost, then the parish will find out the value of my copy.' He used to take his pinch of snuff after that, and look about him as bold as a lord. Ah! the like of him for doing business isn't easy to find now. You may go to London and not match him, even THERE. Which year did you say, sir? Eighteen hundred and what?"

"Eighteen hundred and four," I replied, mentally resolving to give the old man no more opportunities of talking, until my examination of the register was over.

The clerk put on his spectacles, and turned over the leaves of the register, carefully wetting his finger and thumb at every third page. "There it is, sir," said he, with another cheerful smack on the open volume. "There's the year you want."

As I was ignorant of the month in which Sir Percival was born, I began my backward search with the early part of the year. The register-book was of the old-fashioned kind, the entries being all made on blank pages in manuscript, and the divisions which separated them being indicated by ink lines drawn across the page at the close of each entry.

I reached the beginning of the year eighteen hundred and four without encountering the marriage, and then travelled back through December eighteen hundred and three—through November and October—through——

No! not through September also. Under the heading of that month in the year I found the marriage.

I looked carefully at the entry. It was at the bottom of a page, and was for want of room compressed into a smaller space than that occupied by the marriages above. The marriage immediately before it was impressed on my attention by the circumstance of the bridegroom's Christian name being the same as my own. The entry immediately following it (on the top of the next page) was noticeable in another way from the large space it occupied, the record in this case registering the marriages of two brothers at the same time. The register of the marriage of Sir Felix Glyde was in no respect remarkable except for the narrowness of the space into which it was compressed at the bottom of the page. The information about his wife was the usual information given in such cases. She was described as "Cecilia Jane Elster, of Park-View Cottages, Knowlesbury, only daughter of the late Patrick Elster, Esq., formerly of Bath."

I noted down these particulars in my pocket-book, feeling as I did so both doubtful and disheartened about my next proceedings. The Secret which I had believed until this moment to be within my grasp seemed now farther from my reach than ever.

What suggestions of any mystery unexplained had arisen out of my visit to the vestry? I saw no suggestions anywhere. What progress had I made towards discovering the suspected stain on the reputation of Sir Percival's mother? The one fact I had ascertained vindicated her reputation. Fresh doubts, fresh difficulties, fresh delays began to open before me in interminable prospect. What was I to do next? The one immediate resource left to me appeared to be this. I might institute inquiries about "Miss Elster of Knowlesbury," on the chance of advancing towards the

main object of my investigation, by first discovering the secret of Mrs. Catherick's contempt for Sir Percival's mother.

"Have you found what you wanted, sir?" said the clerk, as I closed the register-book.

"Yes," I replied, "but I have some inquiries still to make. I suppose the clergyman who officiated here in the year eighteen hundred and three is no longer alive?"

"No, no, sir, he was dead three or four years before I came here, and that was as long ago as the year twenty-seven. I got this place, sir," persisted my talkative old friend, "through the clerk before me leaving it. They say he was driven out of house and home by his wife—and she's living still down in the new town there. I don't know the rights of the story myself—all I know is I got the place. Mr. Wansborough got it for me—the son of my old master that I was tell you of. He's a free pleasant gentleman as ever lived—rides to the hounds, keeps his pointers and all that. He's vestry-clerk here now as his father was before him."

"Did you not tell me your former master lived at Knowlesbury?" I asked, calling to mind the long story about the precise gentleman of the old school with which my talkative friend had wearied me before he opened the register-book.

"Yes, to be sure, sir," replied the clerk. "Old Mr. Wansborough lived at Knowlesbury, and young Mr. Wansborough lives there too."

"You said just now he was vestry-clerk, like his father before him. I am not quite sure that I know what a vestry-clerk is."

"Don't you indeed, sir?—and you come from London too! Every parish church, you know, has a vestry-clerk and a parish-clerk. The parish-clerk is a man like me (except that I've got a deal more learning than most of them—though I don't boast of it). The vestry-clerk is a sort of an appointment that the lawyers get, and if there's any business to be done for the vestry, why there they are to do it. It's just the same in London. Every parish church there has got its vestry-clerk—and you may take my word for it he's sure to be a lawyer."

"Then young Mr. Wansborough is a lawyer, I suppose?"

"Of course he is, sir! A lawyer in High Street, Knowlesbury—the old offices that his father had before him. The number of times I've swept those offices out, and seen the old gentleman come trotting in to business on his white pony, looking right and left all down the street and nodding to everybody! Bless you, he was a popular character!—he'd have done in London!"

"How far is it to Knowlesbury from this place?"

"A long stretch, sir," said the clerk, with that exaggerated idea of distances, and that vivid perception of difficulties in getting from place to place, which is peculiar to all country people. "Nigh on five mile, I can tell you!"

It was still early in the forenoon. There was plenty of time for a walk to Knowlesbury and back again to Welmingham; and there was no person probably in the town who was fitter to assist my inquiries about the character and position of Sir Percival's mother before her marriage than the local solicitor. Resolving to go at once to Knowlesbury on foot, I led the way out of the vestry.

"Thank you kindly, sir," said the clerk, as I slipped my little present into his hand. "Are you really going to walk all the way to Knowlesbury and back? Well! you're strong on your legs, too—and what a blessing that is, isn't it? There's the road, you can't miss it. I wish I was going your way—it's pleasant to meet with gentlemen from London in a lost corner like this. One hears the news. Wish you good-morning, sir, and thank you kindly once more."

We parted. As I left the church behind me I looked back, and there were the two men again on the road below, with a third in their company, that third person being the short man in black whom I had traced to the railway the evening before.

The three stood talking together for a little while, then separated. The man in black went away by himself towards Welmingham—the other two remained together, evidently waiting to follow me as soon as I walked on.

I proceeded on my way without letting the fellows see that I took any special notice of them. They caused me no conscious irritation of feeling at that moment—on the contrary, they rather revived my sinking hopes. In the surprise of discovering the evidence of the marriage, I had forgotten the inference I had drawn on first perceiving the men in the neighbourhood of the vestry. Their reappearance reminded me that Sir Percival had anticipated my visit to Old Welmingham church as the next result of my interview with Mrs. Catherick—otherwise he would never have placed his spies there to wait for me. Smoothly and fairly as appearances looked in the vestry, there was something wrong beneath them—there was something in the register-book, for aught I knew, that I had not discovered yet.

## X

Once out of sight of the church, I pressed forward briskly on my way to Knowlesbury.

The road was, for the most part, straight and level. Whenever I looked back over it I saw the two spies steadily following me. For the greater part of the way they kept at a safe distance behind. But once or twice they quickened their pace, as if with the purpose of overtaking me, then stopped, consulted together, and fell back again to their former position. They had some special object evidently in view, and they seemed to be hesitating or differing about the best means of accomplishing it. I could not guess exactly what their design might be, but I felt serious doubts of reaching Knowlesbury without some mischance happening to me on the way. These doubts were realised.

I had just entered on a lonely part of the road, with a sharp turn at some distance ahead, and had just concluded (calculating by time) that I must be getting near to the town, when I suddenly heard the steps of the men close behind me.

Before I could look round, one of them (the man by whom I had been followed in London) passed rapidly on my left side and hustled me with his shoulder. I had been more irritated by the manner in which he and his companion had dogged my steps all the way from Old Welmingham than I was myself aware of, and I unfortunately pushed the fellow away smartly with my open hand. He instantly shouted for help. His companion, the tall man in the gamekeeper's clothes, sprang to my right side, and the next moment the two scoundrels held me pinioned between them in the middle of the road.

The conviction that a trap had been laid for me, and the vexation of knowing that I had fallen into it, fortunately restrained me from making my position still worse by an unavailing struggle with two men, one of whom would, in all probability, have been more than a match for me single-handed. I repressed the first natural movement by which I had attempted to shake them off, and looked about to see if there was any person near to whom I could appeal.

A labourer was at work in an adjoining field who must have witnessed all that had passed. I called to him to follow us to the town. He shook his head with stolid obstinacy, and walked away in the direction of a cottage which stood back from the high-road. At the same time the men who held me between them declared their intention of charging me with an assault. I was cool enough and wise enough now to make no opposition. "Drop your hold of my arms," I said, "and I will go

with you to the town.” The man in the gamekeeper’s dress roughly refused. But the shorter man was sharp enough to look to consequences, and not to let his companion commit himself by unnecessary violence. He made a sign to the other, and I walked on between them with my arms free.

We reached the turning in the road, and there, close before us, were the suburbs of Knowlesbury. One of the local policemen was walking along the path by the roadside. The men at once appealed to him. He replied that the magistrate was then sitting at the town-hall, and recommended that we should appear before him immediately.

We went on to the town-hall. The clerk made out a formal summons, and the charge was preferred against me, with the customary exaggeration and the customary perversion of the truth on such occasions. The magistrate (an ill-tempered man, with a sour enjoyment in the exercise of his own power) inquired if any one on or near the road had witnessed the assault, and, greatly to my surprise, the complainant admitted the presence of the labourer in the field. I was enlightened, however, as to the object of the admission by the magistrate’s next words. He remanded me at once for the production of the witness, expressing, at the same time, his willingness to take bail for my reappearance if I could produce one responsible surety to offer it. If I had been known in the town he would have liberated me on my own recognisances, but as I was a total stranger it was necessary that I should find responsible bail.

The whole object of the stratagem was now disclosed to me. It had been so managed as to make a remand necessary in a town where I was a perfect stranger, and where I could not hope to get my liberty on bail. The remand merely extended over three days, until the next sitting of the magistrate. But in that time, while I was in confinement, Sir Percival might use any means he pleased to embarrass my future proceedings—perhaps to screen himself from detection altogether—without the slightest fear of any hindrance on my part. At the end of the three days the charge would, no doubt, be withdrawn, and the attendance of the witness would be perfectly useless.

My indignation, I may almost say, my despair, at this mischievous check to all further progress—so base and trifling in itself, and yet so disheartening and so serious in its probable results—quite unfitted me at first to reflect on the best means of extricating myself from the dilemma in which I now stood. I had the folly to call for writing materials, and to think of privately communicating my real position to the magistrate. The hopelessness and the imprudence of this proceeding failed to strike me before I had actually written the opening lines of the letter. It was not till I had pushed the paper away—not till, I am ashamed to say, I had almost allowed the vexation of my helpless position to conquer me—that a course of action suddenly occurred to my mind, which Sir Percival had probably not anticipated, and which might set me free again in a few hours. I determined to communicate the situation in which I was placed to Mr. Dawson, of Oak Lodge.

I had visited this gentleman’s house, it may be remembered, at the time of my first inquiries in the Blackwater Park neighbourhood, and I had presented to him a letter of introduction from Miss Halcombe, in which she recommended me to his friendly attention in the strongest terms. I now wrote, referring to this letter, and to what I had previously told Mr. Dawson of the delicate and dangerous nature of my inquiries. I had not revealed to him the truth about Laura, having merely described my errand as being of the utmost importance to private family interests with which Miss Halcombe was concerned. Using the same caution still, I now accounted for my presence at Knowlesbury in the same manner, and I put it to the doctor to say whether the trust reposed in me by a lady whom he well knew, and the hospitality I had myself received in his

house, justified me or not in asking him to come to my assistance in a place where I was quite friendless.

I obtained permission to hire a messenger to drive away at once with my letter in a conveyance which might be used to bring the doctor back immediately. Oak Lodge was on the Knowlesbury side of Blackwater. The man declared he could drive there in forty minutes, and could bring Mr. Dawson back in forty more. I directed him to follow the doctor wherever he might happen to be, if he was not at home, and then sat down to wait for the result with all the patience and all the hope that I could summon to help me.

It was not quite half-past one when the messenger departed. Before half-past three he returned, and brought the doctor with him. Mr. Dawson's kindness, and the delicacy with which he treated his prompt assistance quite as a matter of course, almost overpowered me. The bail required was offered, and accepted immediately. Before four o'clock, on that afternoon, I was shaking hands warmly with the good old doctor—a free man again—in the streets of Knowlesbury.

Mr. Dawson hospitably invited me to go back with him to Oak Lodge, and take up my quarters there for the night. I could only reply that my time was not my own, and I could only ask him to let me pay my visit in a few days, when I might repeat my thanks, and offer to him all the explanations which I felt to be only his due, but which I was not then in a position to make. We parted with friendly assurances on both sides, and I turned my steps at once to Mr. Wansborough's office in the High Street.

Time was now of the last importance.

The news of my being free on bail would reach Sir Percival, to an absolute certainty, before night. If the next few hours did not put me in a position to justify his worst fears, and to hold him helpless at my mercy, I might lose every inch of the ground I had gained, never to recover it again. The unscrupulous nature of the man, the local influence he possessed, the desperate peril of exposure with which my blindfold inquiries threatened him—all warned me to press on to positive discovery, without the useless waste of a single minute. I had found time to think while I was waiting for Mr. Dawson's arrival, and I had well employed it. Certain portions of the conversation of the talkative old clerk, which had wearied me at the time, now recurred to my memory with a new significance, and a suspicion crossed my mind darkly which had not occurred to me while I was in the vestry. On my way to Knowlesbury, I had only proposed to apply to Mr. Wansborough for information on the subject of Sir Percival's mother. My object now was to examine the duplicate register of Old Welmingham Church.

Mr. Wansborough was in his office when I inquired for him.

He was a jovial, red-faced, easy-looking man—more like a country squire than a lawyer—and he seemed to be both surprised and amused by my application. He had heard of his father's copy of the register, but had not even seen it himself. It had never been inquired after, and it was no doubt in the strong room among other papers that had not been disturbed since his father's death. It was a pity (Mr. Wansborough said) that the old gentleman was not alive to hear his precious copy asked for at last. He would have ridden his favourite hobby harder than ever now. How had I come to hear of the copy? was it through anybody in the town?

I parried the question as well as I could. It was impossible at this stage of the investigation to be too cautious, and it was just as well not to let Mr. Wansborough know prematurely that I had already examined the original register. I described myself, therefore, as pursuing a family inquiry, to the object of which every possible saving of time was of great importance. I was anxious to send certain particulars to London by that day's post, and one look at the duplicate register (paying, of course, the necessary fees) might supply what I required, and save me a

further journey to Old Welmingham. I added that, in the event of my subsequently requiring a copy of the original register, I should make application to Mr. Wansborough's office to furnish me with the document.

After this explanation no objection was made to producing the copy. A clerk was sent to the strong room, and after some delay returned with the volume. It was of exactly the same size as the volume in the vestry, the only difference being that the copy was more smartly bound. I took it with me to an unoccupied desk. My hands were trembling—my head was burning hot—I felt the necessity of concealing my agitation as well as I could from the persons about me in the room, before I ventured on opening the book.

On the blank page at the beginning, to which I first turned, were traced some lines in faded ink. They contained these words—

“Copy of the Marriage Register of Welmingham Parish Church. Executed under my orders, and afterwards compared, entry by entry, with the original, by myself. (Signed) Robert Wansborough, vestry-clerk.” Below this note there was a line added, in another handwriting, as follows: “Extending from the first of January, 1800, to the thirtieth of June, 1815.”

I turned to the month of September, eighteen hundred and three. I found the marriage of the man whose Christian name was the same as my own. I found the double register of the marriages of the two brothers. And between these entries, at the bottom of the page?

Nothing! Not a vestige of the entry which recorded the marriage of Sir Felix Glyde and Cecilia Jane Elster in the register of the church!

My heart gave a great bound, and throbbed as if it would stifle me. I looked again—I was afraid to believe the evidence of my own eyes. No! not a doubt. The marriage was not there. The entries on the copy occupied exactly the same places on the page as the entries in the original. The last entry on one page recorded the marriage of the man with my Christian name. Below it there was a blank space—a space evidently left because it was too narrow to contain the entry of the marriages of the two brothers, which in the copy, as in the original, occupied the top of the next page. That space told the whole story! There it must have remained in the church register from eighteen hundred and three (when the marriages had been solemnised and the copy had been made) to eighteen hundred and twenty-seven, when Sir Percival appeared at Old Welmingham. Here, at Knowlesbury, was the chance of committing the forgery shown to me in the copy, and there, at Old Welmingham) was the forgery committed in the register of the church.

My head turned giddy—I held by the desk to keep myself from falling. Of all the suspicions which had struck me in relation to that desperate man, not one had been near the truth.

The idea that he was not Sir Percival Glyde at all, that he had no more claim to the baronetcy and to Blackwater Park than the poorest labourer who worked on the estate, had never once occurred to my mind. At one time I had thought he might be Anne Catherick's father—at another time I had thought he might have been Anne Catherick's husband—the offence of which he was really guilty had been, from first to last, beyond the widest reach of my imagination.

The paltry means by which the fraud had been effected, the magnitude and daring of the crime that it represented, the horror of the consequences involved in its discovery, overwhelmed me. Who could wonder now at the brute-restlessness of the wretch's life—at his desperate alternations between abject duplicity and reckless violence—at the madness of guilty distrust which had made him imprison Anne Catherick in the Asylum, and had given him over to the vile conspiracy against his wife, on the bare suspicion that the one and the other knew his terrible secret? The disclosure of that secret might, in past years, have hanged him— might now

transport him for life. The disclosure of that secret, even if the sufferers by his deception spared him the penalties of the law, would deprive him at one blow of the name, the rank, the estate, the whole social existence that he had usurped. This was the Secret, and it was mine! A word from me, and house, lands, baronetcy, were gone from him for ever—a word from me, and he was driven out into the world, a nameless, penniless, friendless outcast! The man's whole future hung on my lips—and he knew it by this time as certainly as I did!

That last thought steadied me. Interests far more precious than my own depended on the caution which must now guide my slightest actions. There was no possible treachery which Sir Percival might not attempt against me. In the danger and desperation of his position he would be staggered by no risks, he would recoil at no crime—he would literally hesitate at nothing to save himself.

I considered for a minute. My first necessity was to secure positive evidence in writing of the discovery that I had just made, and in the event of any personal misadventure happening to me, to place that evidence beyond Sir Percival's reach. The copy of the register was sure to be safe in Mr. Wansborough's strong room. But the position of the original in the vestry was, as I had seen with my own eyes, anything but secure.

In this emergency I resolved to return to the church, to apply again to the clerk, and to take the necessary extract from the register before I slept that night. I was not then aware that a legally-certified copy was necessary, and that no document merely drawn out by myself could claim the proper importance as a proof. I was not aware of this, and my determination to keep my present proceedings a secret prevented me from asking any questions which might have procured the necessary information. My one anxiety was the anxiety to get back to Old Welmingham. I made the best excuses I could for the discomposure in my face and manner which Mr. Wansborough had already noticed, laid the necessary fee on his table, arranged that I should write to him in a day or two, and left the office, with my head in a whirl and my blood throbbing through my veins at fever heat.

It was just getting dark. The idea occurred to me that I might be followed again and attacked on the high-road.

My walking-stick was a light one, of little or no use for purposes of defence. I stopped before leaving Knowlesbury and bought a stout country cudgel, short, and heavy at the head. With this homely weapon, if any one man tried to stop me I was a match for him. If more than one attacked me I could trust to my heels. In my school-days I had been a noted runner, and I had not wanted for practice since in the later time of my experience in Central America.

I started from the town at a brisk pace, and kept the middle of the road.

A small misty rain was falling, and it was impossible for the first half of the way to make sure whether I was followed or not. But at the last half of my journey, when I supposed myself to be about two miles from the church, I saw a man run by me in the rain, and then heard the gate of a field by the roadside shut to sharply. I kept straight on, with my cudgel ready in my hand, my ears on the alert, and my eyes straining to see through the mist and the darkness. Before I had advanced a hundred yards there was a rustling in the hedge on my right, and three men sprang out into the road.

I drew aside on the instant to the footpath. The two foremost men were carried beyond me before they could check themselves. The third was as quick as lightning. He stopped, half turned, and struck at me with his stick. The blow was aimed at hazard, and was not a severe one. It fell on my left shoulder. I returned it heavily on his head. He staggered back and jostled his two

companions just as they were both rushing at me. This circumstance gave me a moment's start. I slipped by them, and took to the middle of the road again at the top of my speed.

The two unhurt men pursued me. They were both good runners—the road was smooth and level, and for the first five minutes or more I was conscious that I did not gain on them. It was perilous work to run for long in the darkness. I could barely see the dim black line of the hedges on either side, and any chance obstacle in the road would have thrown me down to a certainty. Ere long I felt the ground changing—it descended from the level at a turn, and then rose again beyond. Downhill the men rather gained on me, but uphill I began to distance them. The rapid, regular thump of their feet grew fainter on my ear, and I calculated by the sound that I was far enough in advance to take to the fields with a good chance of their passing me in the darkness. Diverging to the footpath, I made for the first break that I could guess at, rather than see, in the hedge. It proved to be a closed gate. I vaulted over, and finding myself in a field, kept across it steadily with my back to the road. I heard the men pass the gate, still running, then in a minute more heard one of them call to the other to come back. It was no matter what they did now, I was out of their sight and out of their hearing. I kept straight across the field, and when I had reached the farther extremity of it, waited there for a minute to recover my breath.

It was impossible to venture back to the road, but I was determined nevertheless to get to Old Welmingham that evening.

Neither moon nor stars appeared to guide me. I only knew that I had kept the wind and rain at my back on leaving Knowlesbury, and if I now kept them at my back still, I might at least be certain of not advancing altogether in the wrong direction.

Proceeding on this plan, I crossed the country—meeting with no worse obstacles than hedges, ditches, and thickets, which every now and then obliged me to alter my course for a little while—until I found myself on a hillside, with the ground sloping away steeply before me. I descended to the bottom of the hollow, squeezed my way through a hedge, and got out into a lane. Having turned to the right on leaving the road, I now turned to the left, on the chance of regaining the line from which I had wandered. After following the muddy windings of the lane for ten minutes or more, I saw a cottage with a light in one of the windows. The garden gate was open to the lane, and I went in at once to inquire my way.

Before I could knock at the door it was suddenly opened, and a man came running out with a lighted lantern in his hand. He stopped and held it up at the sight of me. We both started as we saw each other. My wanderings had led me round the outskirts of the village, and had brought me out at the lower end of it. I was back at Old Welmingham, and the man with the lantern was no other than my acquaintance of the morning, the parish clerk.

His manner appeared to have altered strangely in the interval since I had last seen him. He looked suspicious and confused—his ruddy cheeks were deeply flushed—and his first words, when he spoke, were quite unintelligible to me.

“Where are the keys?” he asked. “Have you taken them?”

“What keys?” I repeated. “I have this moment come from Knowlesbury. What keys do you mean?”

“The keys of the vestry. Lord save us and help us! what shall I do? The keys are gone! Do you hear?” cried the old man, shaking the lantern at me in his agitation, “the keys are gone!”

“How? When? Who can have taken them?”

“I don't know,” said the clerk, staring about him wildly in the darkness. “I've only just got back. I told you I had a long day's work this morning—I locked the door and shut the window down—it's open now, the window's open. Look! somebody has got in there and taken the keys.”

He turned to the casement window to show me that it was wide open. The door of the lantern came loose from its fastening as he swayed it round, and the wind blew the candle out instantly.

“Get another light,” I said, “and let us both go to the vestry together. Quick! quick!”

I hurried him into the house. The treachery that I had every reason to expect, the treachery that might deprive me of every advantage I had gained, was at that moment, perhaps, in process of accomplishment. My impatience to reach the church was so great that I could not remain inactive in the cottage while the clerk lit the lantern again. I walked out, down the garden path, into the lane.

Before I had advanced ten paces a man approached me from the direction leading to the church. He spoke respectfully as we met. I could not see his face, but judging by his voice only, he was a perfect stranger to me.

“I beg your pardon, Sir Percival——” he began.

I stopped him before he could say more.

“The darkness misleads you,” I said. “I am not Sir Percival.”

The man drew back directly.

“I thought it was my master,” he muttered, in a confused, doubtful way.

“You expected to meet your master here?”

“I was told to wait in the lane.”

With that answer he retraced his steps. I looked back at the cottage and saw the clerk coming out, with the lantern lighted once more. I took the old man’s arm to help him on the more quickly. We hastened along the lane, and passed the person who had accosted me. As well as I could see by the light of the lantern, he was a servant out of livery.

“Who’s that?” whispered the clerk. “Does he know anything about the keys?”

“We won’t wait to ask him,” I replied. “We will go on to the vestry first.”

The church was not visible, even by daytime, until the end of the lane was reached. As we mounted the rising ground which led to the building from that point, one of the village children—a boy— came close up to us, attracted by the light we carried, and recognised the clerk.

“I say, measter,” said the boy, pulling officiously at the clerk’s coat, “there be summun up yander in the church. I heerd un lock the door on hisself—I heerd un strike a loight wi’ a match.”

The clerk trembled and leaned against me heavily.

“Come! come!” I said encouragingly. “We are not too late. We will catch the man, whoever he is. Keep the lantern, and follow me as fast as you can.”

I mounted the hill rapidly. The dark mass of the church-tower was the first object I discerned dimly against the night sky. As I turned aside to get round to the vestry, I heard heavy footsteps close to me. The servant had ascended to the church after us. “I don’t mean any harm,” he said, when I turned round on him, “I’m only looking for my master.” The tones in which he spoke betrayed unmistakable fear. I took no notice of him and went on.

The instant I turned the corner and came in view of the vestry, I saw the lantern-skylight on the roof brilliantly lit up from within. It shone out with dazzling brightness against the murky, starless sky.

I hurried through the churchyard to the door.

As I got near there was a strange smell stealing out on the damp night air. I heard a snapping noise inside—I saw the light above grow brighter and brighter—a pane of the glass cracked—I ran to the door and put my hand on it. The vestry was on fire!

Before I could move, before I could draw my breath after that discovery, I was horror-struck by a heavy thump against the door from the inside. I heard the key worked violently in the lock—I heard a man’s voice behind the door, raised to a dreadful shrillness, screaming for help.

The servant who had followed me staggered back shuddering, and dropped to his knees. “Oh, my God!” he said, “it’s Sir Percival!”

As the words passed his lips the clerk joined us, and at the same moment there was another and a last grating turn of the key in the lock.

“The Lord have mercy on his soul!” said the old man. “He is doomed and dead. He has hampered the lock.”

I rushed to the door. The one absorbing purpose that had filled all my thoughts, that had controlled all my actions, for weeks and weeks past, vanished in an instant from my mind. All remembrance of the heartless injury the man’s crimes had inflicted—of the love, the innocence, the happiness he had pitilessly laid waste— of the oath I had sworn in my own heart to summon him to the terrible reckoning that he deserved—passed from my memory like a dream. I remembered nothing but the horror of his situation. I felt nothing but the natural human impulse to save him from a frightful death.

“Try the other door!” I shouted. “Try the door into the church! The lock’s hampered. You’re a dead man if you waste another moment on it.”

There had been no renewed cry for help when the key was turned for the last time. There was no sound now of any kind, to give token that he was still alive. I heard nothing but the quickening crackle of the flames, and the sharp snap of the glass in the skylight above.

I looked round at my two companions. The servant had risen to his feet—he had taken the lantern, and was holding it up vacantly at the door. Terror seemed to have struck him with downright idiocy—he waited at my heels, he followed me about when I moved like a dog. The clerk sat crouched up on one of the tombstones, shivering, and moaning to himself. The one moment in which I looked at them was enough to show me that they were both helpless.

Hardly knowing what I did, acting desperately on the first impulse that occurred to me, I seized the servant and pushed him against the vestry wall. “Stoop!” I said, “and hold by the stones. I am going to climb over you to the roof—I am going to break the skylight, and give him some air!”

The man trembled from head to foot, but he held firm. I got on his back, with my cudgel in my mouth, seized the parapet with both hands, and was instantly on the roof. In the frantic hurry and agitation of the moment, it never struck me that I might let out the flame instead of letting in the air. I struck at the skylight, and battered in the cracked, loosened glass at a blow. The fire leaped out like a wild beast from its lair. If the wind had not chanced, in the position I occupied, to set it away from me, my exertions might have ended then and there. I crouched on the roof as the smoke poured out above me with the flame. The gleams and flashes of the light showed me the servant’s face staring up vacantly under the wall—the clerk risen to his feet on the tombstone, wringing his hands in despair—and the scanty population of the village, haggard men and terrified women, clustered beyond in the churchyard—all appearing and disappearing, in the red of the dreadful glare, in the black of the choking smoke. And the man beneath my feet!—the man, suffocating, burning, dying so near us all, so utterly beyond our reach!

The thought half maddened me. I lowered myself from the roof, by my hands, and dropped to the ground.

“The key of the church!” I shouted to the clerk. “We must try it that way—we may save him yet if we can burst open the inner door.”

“No, no, no!” cried the old man. “No hope! the church key and the vestry key are on the same ring—both inside there! Oh, sir, he’s past saving—he’s dust and ashes by this time!”

“They’ll see the fire from the town,” said a voice from among the men behind me. “There’s a ingine in the town. They’ll save the church.”

I called to that man—HE had his wits about him—I called to him to come and speak to me. It would be a quarter of an hour at least before the town engine could reach us. The horror of remaining inactive all that time was more than I could face. In defiance of my own reason I persuaded myself that the doomed and lost wretch in the vestry might still be lying senseless on the floor, might not be dead yet. If we broke open the door, might we save him? I knew the strength of the heavy lock—I knew the thickness of the nailed oak—I knew the hopelessness of assailing the one and the other by ordinary means. But surely there were beams still left in the dismantled cottages near the church? What if we got one, and used it as a battering-ram against the door?

The thought leaped through me like the fire leaping out of the shattered skylight. I appealed to the man who had spoken first of the fire-engine in the town. “Have you got your pick-axes handy?” Yes, they had. “And a hatchet, and a saw, and a bit of rope?” Yes! yes! yes! I ran down among the villagers, with the lantern in my hand. “Five shillings apiece to every man who helps me!” They started into life at the words. That ravenous second hunger of poverty—the hunger for money—roused them into tumult and activity in a moment. “Two of you for more lanterns, if you have them! Two of you for the pickaxes and the tools! The rest after me to find the beam!” They cheered—with shrill starveling voices they cheered. The women and the children fled back on either side. We rushed in a body down the churchyard path to the first empty cottage. Not a man was left behind but the clerk—the poor old clerk standing on the flat tombstone sobbing and wailing over the church. The servant was still at my heels—his white, helpless, panic-stricken face was close over my shoulder as we pushed into the cottage. There were rafters from the torn-down floor above, lying loose on the ground—but they were too light. A beam ran across over our heads, but not out of reach of our arms and our pickaxes—a beam fast at each end in the ruined wall, with ceiling and flooring all ripped away, and a great gap in the roof above, open to the sky. We attacked the beam at both ends at once. God! how it held—how the brick and mortar of the wall resisted us! We struck, and tugged, and tore. The beam gave at one end—it came down with a lump of brickwork after it. There was a scream from the women all huddled in the doorway to look at us—a shout from the men—two of them down but not hurt. Another tug all together—and the beam was loose at both ends. We raised it, and gave the word to clear the doorway. Now for the work! now for the rush at the door! There is the fire streaming into the sky, streaming brighter than ever to light us! Steady along the churchyard path—steady with the beam for a rush at the door. One, two, three—and off. Out rings the cheering again, irrepressibly. We have shaken it already, the hinges must give if the lock won’t. Another run with the beam! One, two, three—and off. It’s loose! the stealthy fire darts at us through the crevice all round it. Another, and a last rush! The door falls in with a crash. A great hush of awe, a stillness of breathless expectation, possesses every living soul of us. We look for the body. The scorching heat on our faces drives us back: we see nothing—above, below, all through the room, we see nothing but a sheet of living fire.

“Where is he?” whispered the servant, staring vacantly at the flames.

“He’s dust and ashes,” said the clerk. “And the books are dust and ashes—and oh, sirs! the church will be dust and ashes soon.”

Those were the only two who spoke. When they were silent again, nothing stirred in the stillness but the bubble and the crackle of the flames.

Hark!

A harsh rattling sound in the distance—then the hollow beat of horses' hoofs at full gallop—then the low roar, the all- predominant tumult of hundreds of human voices clamouring and shouting together. The engine at last.

The people about me all turned from the fire, and ran eagerly to the brow of the hill. The old clerk tried to go with the rest, but his strength was exhausted. I saw him holding by one of the tombstones. "Save the church!" he cried out faintly, as if the firemen could hear him already.

Save the church!

The only man who never moved was the servant. There he stood, his eyes still fastened on the flames in a changeless, vacant stare. I spoke to him, I shook him by the arm. He was past rousing. He only whispered once more, "Where is he?"

In ten minutes the engine was in position, the well at the back of the church was feeding it, and the hose was carried to the doorway of the vestry. If help had been wanted from me I could not have afforded it now. My energy of will was gone—my strength was exhausted—the turmoil of my thoughts was fearfully and suddenly stilled, now I knew that he was dead.

I stood useless and helpless—looking, looking, looking into the burning room.

I saw the fire slowly conquered. The brightness of the glare faded—the steam rose in white clouds, and the smouldering heaps of embers showed red and black through it on the floor. There was a pause—then an advance all together of the firemen and the police which blocked up the doorway—then a consultation in low voices—and then two men were detached from the rest, and sent out of the churchyard through the crowd. The crowd drew back on either side in dead silence to let them pass.

After a while a great shudder ran through the people, and the living lane widened slowly. The men came back along it with a door from one of the empty houses. They carried it to the vestry and went in. The police closed again round the doorway, and men stole out from among the crowd by twos and threes and stood behind them to be the first to see. Others waited near to be the first to hear. Women and children were among these last.

The tidings from the vestry began to flow out among the crowd— they dropped slowly from mouth to mouth till they reached the place where I was standing. I heard the questions and answers repeated again and again in low, eager tones all round me.

"Have they found him?" "Yes."—"Where?" "Against the door, on his face."—"Which door?" "The door that goes into the church. His head was against it—he was down on his face."—"Is his face burnt?" "No." "Yes, it is." "No, scorched, not burnt—he lay on his face, I tell you."—"Who was he? A lord, they say." "No, not a lord. SIR Something; Sir means Knight." "And Baronight, too." "No." "Yes, it does."—"What did he want in there?" "No good, you may depend on it."—"Did he do it on purpose?"—"Burn himself on purpose!"—"I don't mean himself, I mean the vestry."—"Is he dreadful to look at?" "Dreadful!"—"Not about the face, though?" "No, no, not so much about the face. Don't anybody know him?" "There's a man says he does."—"Who?" "A servant, they say. But he's struck stupid-like, and the police don't believe him."—"Don't anybody else know who it is?" "Hush——!"

The loud, clear voice of a man in authority silenced the low hum of talking all round me in an instant.

"Where is the gentleman who tried to save him?" said the voice.

“Here, sir—here he is!” Dozens of eager faces pressed about me— dozens of eager arms parted the crowd. The man in authority came up to me with a lantern in his hand.

“This way, sir, if you please,” he said quietly.

I was unable to speak to him, I was unable to resist him when he took my arm. I tried to say that I had never seen the dead man in his lifetime—that there was no hope of identifying him by means of a stranger like me. But the words failed on my lips. I was faint, and silent, and helpless.

“Do you know him, sir?”

I was standing inside a circle of men. Three of them opposite to me were holding lanterns low down to the ground. Their eyes, and the eyes of all the rest, were fixed silently and expectantly on my face. I knew what was at my feet—I knew why they were holding the lanterns so low to the ground.

“Can you identify him, sir?”

My eyes dropped slowly. At first I saw nothing under them but a coarse canvas cloth. The dripping of the rain on it was audible in the dreadful silence. I looked up, along the cloth, and there at the end, stark and grim and black, in the yellow light—there was his dead face.

So, for the first and last time, I saw him. So the Visitation of God ruled it that he and I should meet.

## XI

The inquest was hurried for certain local reasons which weighed with the coroner and the town authorities. It was held on the afternoon of the next day. I was necessarily one among the witnesses summoned to assist the objects of the investigation.

My first proceeding in the morning was to go to the post-office, and inquire for the letter which I expected from Marian. No change of circumstances, however extraordinary, could affect the one great anxiety which weighed on my mind while I was away from London. The morning’s letter, which was the only assurance I could receive that no misfortune had happened in my absence, was still the absorbing interest with which my day began.

To my relief, the letter from Marian was at the office waiting for me.

Nothing had happened—they were both as safe and as well as when I had left them. Laura sent her love, and begged that I would let her know of my return a day beforehand. Her sister added, in explanation of this message, that she had saved “nearly a sovereign” out of her own private purse, and that she had claimed the privilege of ordering the dinner and giving the dinner which was to celebrate the day of my return. I read these little domestic confidences in the bright morning with the terrible recollection of what had happened the evening before vivid in my memory. The necessity of sparing Laura any sudden knowledge of the truth was the first consideration which the letter suggested to me. I wrote at once to Marian to tell her what I have told in these pages—presenting the tidings as gradually and gently as I could, and warning her not to let any such thing as a newspaper fall in Laura’s way while I was absent. In the case of any other woman, less courageous and less reliable, I might have hesitated before I ventured on unreservedly disclosing the whole truth. But I owed it to Marian to be faithful to my past experience of her, and to trust her as I trusted herself.

My letter was necessarily a long one. It occupied me until the time came for proceeding to the inquest.

The objects of the legal inquiry were necessarily beset by peculiar complications and difficulties. Besides the investigation into the manner in which the deceased had met his death, there were serious questions to be settled relating to the cause of the fire, to the abstraction of the keys, and to the presence of a stranger in the vestry at the time when the flames broke out. Even the identification of the dead man had not yet been accomplished. The helpless condition of the servant had made the police distrustful of his asserted recognition of his master. They had sent to Knowlesbury over-night to secure the attendance of witnesses who were well acquainted with the personal appearance of Sir Percival Glyde, and they had communicated, the first thing in the morning, with Blackwater Park. These precautions enabled the coroner and jury to settle the question of identity, and to confirm the correctness of the servant's assertion; the evidence offered by competent witnesses, and by the discovery of certain facts, being subsequently strengthened by an examination of the dead man's watch. The crest and the name of Sir Percival Glyde were engraved inside it.

The next inquiries related to the fire.

The servant and I, and the boy who had heard the light struck in the vestry, were the first witnesses called. The boy gave his evidence clearly enough, but the servant's mind had not yet recovered the shock inflicted on it—he was plainly incapable of assisting the objects of the inquiry, and he was desired to stand down.

To my own relief, my examination was not a long one. I had not known the deceased—I had never seen him—I was not aware of his presence at Old Welmingham—and I had not been in the vestry at the finding of the body. All I could prove was that I had stopped at the clerk's cottage to ask my way—that I had heard from him of the loss of the keys—that I had accompanied him to the church to render what help I could—that I had seen the fire—that I had heard some person unknown, inside the vestry, trying vainly to unlock the door—and that I had done what I could, from motives of humanity, to save the man. Other witnesses, who had been acquainted with the deceased, were asked if they could explain the mystery of his presumed abstraction of the keys, and his presence in the burning room. But the coroner seemed to take it for granted, naturally enough, that I, as a total stranger in the neighbourhood, and a total stranger to Sir Percival Glyde, could not be in a position to offer any evidence on these two points.

The course that I was myself bound to take, when my formal examination had closed, seemed clear to me. I did not feel called on to volunteer any statement of my own private convictions, in the first place, because my doing so could serve no practical purpose, now that all proof in support of any surmises of mine was burnt with the burnt register; in the second place, because I could not have intelligibly stated my opinion—my unsupported opinion—without disclosing the whole story of the conspiracy, and producing beyond a doubt the same unsatisfactory effect on the mind of the coroner and the jury, which I had already produced on the mind of Mr. Kyrle.

In these pages, however, and after the time that has now elapsed, no such cautions and restraints as are here described need fetter the free expression of my opinion. I will state briefly, before my pen occupies itself with other events, how my own convictions lead me to account for the abstraction of the keys, for the outbreak of the fire, and for the death of the man.

The news of my being free on bail drove Sir Percival, as I believe, to his last resources. The attempted attack on the road was one of those resources, and the suppression of all practical proof of his crime, by destroying the page of the register on which the forgery had been committed, was the other, and the surest of the two. If I could produce no extract from the original book to compare with the certified copy at Knowlesbury, I could produce no positive evidence, and could threaten him with no fatal exposure. All that was necessary to the attainment

of his end was, that he should get into the vestry unperceived, that he should tear out the page in the register, and that he should leave the vestry again as privately as he had entered it.

On this supposition, it is easy to understand why he waited until nightfall before he made the attempt, and why he took advantage of the clerk's absence to possess himself of the keys. Necessity would oblige him to strike a light to find his way to the right register, and common caution would suggest his locking the door on the inside in case of intrusion on the part of any inquisitive stranger, or on my part, if I happened to be in the neighbourhood at the time.

I cannot believe that it was any part of his intention to make the destruction of the register appear to be the result of accident, by purposely setting the vestry on fire. The bare chance that prompt assistance might arrive, and that the books might, by the remotest possibility, be saved, would have been enough, on a moment's consideration, to dismiss any idea of this sort from his mind. Remembering the quantity of combustible objects in the vestry—the straw, the papers, the packing-cases, the dry wood, the old worm-eaten presses—all the probabilities, in my estimation, point to the fire as the result of an accident with his matches or his light.

His first impulse, under these circumstances, was doubtless to try to extinguish the flames, and failing in that, his second impulse (ignorant as he was of the state of the lock) had been to attempt to escape by the door which had given him entrance. When I had called to him, the flames must have reached across the door leading into the church, on either side of which the presses extended, and close to which the other combustible objects were placed. In all probability, the smoke and flame (confined as they were to the room) had been too much for him when he tried to escape by the inner door. He must have dropped in his death-swoon, he must have sunk in the place where he was found, just as I got on the roof to break the skylight window. Even if we had been able, afterwards, to get into the church, and to burst open the door from that side, the delay must have been fatal. He would have been past saving, long past saving, by that time. We should only have given the flames free ingress into the church—the church, which was now preserved, but which, in that event, would have shared the fate of the vestry. There is no doubt in my mind, there can be no doubt in the mind of any one, that he was a dead man before ever we got to the empty cottage, and worked with might and main to tear down the beam.

This is the nearest approach that any theory of mine can make towards accounting for a result which was visible matter of fact. As I have described them, so events passed to us out-side. As I have related it, so his body was found.

The inquest was adjourned over one day—no explanation that the eye of the law could recognise having been discovered thus far to account for the mysterious circumstances of the case.

It was arranged that more witnesses should be summoned, and that the London solicitor of the deceased should be invited to attend. A medical man was also charged with the duty of reporting on the mental condition of the servant, which appeared at present to debar him from giving any evidence of the least importance. He could only declare, in a dazed way, that he had been ordered, on the night of the fire, to wait in the lane, and that he knew nothing else, except that the deceased was certainly his master.

My own impression was, that he had been first used (without any guilty knowledge on his own part) to ascertain the fact of the clerk's absence from home on the previous day, and that he had been afterwards ordered to wait near the church (but out of sight of the vestry) to assist his master, in the event of my escaping the attack on the road, and of a collision occurring between

Sir Percival and myself. It is necessary to add, that the man's own testimony was never obtained to confirm this view. The medical report of him declared that what little mental faculty he possessed was seriously shaken; nothing satisfactory was extracted from him at the adjourned inquest, and for aught I know to the contrary, he may never have recovered to this day.

I returned to the hotel at Welmingham so jaded in body and mind, so weakened and depressed by all that I had gone through, as to be quite unfit to endure the local gossip about the inquest, and to answer the trivial questions that the talkers addressed to me in the coffee-room. I withdrew from my scanty dinner to my cheap garret-chamber to secure myself a little quiet, and to think undisturbed of Laura and Marian.

If I had been a richer man I would have gone back to London, and would have comforted myself with a sight of the two dear faces again that night. But I was bound to appear, if called on, at the adjourned inquest, and doubly bound to answer my bail before the magistrate at Knowlesbury. Our slender resources had suffered already, and the doubtful future—more doubtful than ever now—made me dread decreasing our means unnecessarily by allowing myself an indulgence even at the small cost of a double railway journey in the carriages of the second class.

The next day—the day immediately following the inquest—was left at my own disposal. I began the morning by again applying at the post-office for my regular report from Marian. It was waiting for me as before, and it was written throughout in good spirits. I read the letter thankfully, and then set forth with my mind at ease for the day to go to Old Welmingham, and to view the scene of the fire by the morning light.

What changes met me when I got there!

Through all the ways of our unintelligible world the trivial and the terrible walk hand in hand together. The irony of circumstances holds no mortal catastrophe in respect. When I reached the church, the trampled condition of the burial-ground was the only serious trace left to tell of the fire and the death. A rough hoarding of boards had been knocked up before the vestry doorway. Rude caricatures were scrawled on it already, and the village children were fighting and shouting for the possession of the best peep-hole to see through. On the spot where I had heard the cry for help from the burning room, on the spot where the panic-stricken servant had dropped on his knees, a fussy flock of poultry was now scrambling for the first choice of worms after the rain; and on the ground at my feet, where the door and its dreadful burden had been laid, a workman's dinner was waiting for him, tied up in a yellow basin, and his faithful cur in charge was yelping at me for coming near the food. The old clerk, looking idly at the slow commencement of the repairs, had only one interest that he could talk about now—the interest of escaping all blame for his own part on account of the accident that had happened. One of the village women, whose white wild face I remembered the picture of terror when we pulled down the beam, was giggling with another woman, the picture of inanity, over an old washing-tub. There is nothing serious in mortality! Solomon in all his glory was Solomon with the elements of the contemptible lurking in every fold of his robes and in every corner of his palace.

As I left the place, my thoughts turned, not for the first time, to the complete overthrow that all present hope of establishing Laura's identity had now suffered through Sir Percival's death. He was gone—and with him the chance was gone which had been the one object of all my labours and all my hopes.

Could I look at my failure from no truer point of view than this?

Suppose he had lived, would that change of circumstance have altered the result? Could I have made my discovery a marketable commodity, even for Laura's sake, after I had found out that

robbery of the rights of others was the essence of Sir Percival's crime? Could I have offered the price of MY silence for HIS confession of the conspiracy, when the effect of that silence must have been to keep the right heir from the estates, and the right owner from the name? Impossible! If Sir Percival had lived, the discovery, from which (In my ignorance of the true nature of the Secret) I had hoped so much, could not have been mine to suppress or to make public, as I thought best, for the vindication of Laura's rights. In common honesty and common honour I must have gone at once to the stranger whose birthright had been usurped—I must have renounced the victory at the moment when it was mine by placing my discovery unreservedly in that stranger's hands—and I must have faced afresh all the difficulties which stood between me and the one object of my life, exactly as I was resolved in my heart of hearts to face them now!

I returned to Welmingham with my mind composed, feeling more sure of myself and my resolution than I had felt yet.

On my way to the hotel I passed the end of the square in which Mrs. Catherick lived. Should I go back to the house, and make another attempt to see her. No. That news of Sir Percival's death, which was the last news she ever expected to hear, must have reached her hours since. All the proceedings at the inquest had been reported in the local paper that morning—there was nothing I could tell her which she did not know already. My interest in making her speak had slackened. I remembered the furtive hatred in her face when she said, "There is no news of Sir Percival that I don't expect—except the news of his death." I remembered the stealthy interest in her eyes when they settled on me at parting, after she had spoken those words. Some instinct, deep in my heart, which I felt to be a true one, made the prospect of again entering her presence repulsive to me—I turned away from the square, and went straight back to the hotel.

Some hours later, while I was resting in the coffee-room, a letter was placed in my hands by the waiter. It was addressed to me by name, and I found on inquiry that it had been left at the bar by a woman just as it was near dusk, and just before the gas was lighted. She had said nothing, and she had gone away again before there was time to speak to her, or even to notice who she was.

I opened the letter. It was neither dated nor signed, and the handwriting was palpably disguised. Before I had read the first sentence, however, I knew who my correspondent was—Mrs. Catherick.

The letter ran as follows—I copy it exactly, word for word:—