



THE WOMAN
IN WHITE
WILKIE COLLINS



EPOCH TWO

The Story Continued by Marian Halcombe, Part VII

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Where is Fanny?” I inquired.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Instead of answering me he turned round to the Count.

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

“What I said before,” replied the Count—“No.”

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

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

Sir Percival drew back a step, and stared at her in dead silence. The declaration he had just heard—a declaration which he well knew, as I well knew, Madame Fosco would not have ventured to make without her husband’s permission—seemed to

petrify him with surprise. The Count stood by, and looked at his wife with the most enthusiastic admiration.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It means that you and I together have brought the worst-tempered man in all England to his senses,” answered the Count. “It means, Miss Halcombe, that Lady Glyde is relieved from a gross indignity, and you from the repetition of an unpardonable insult. Suffer me to express my admiration of your conduct and your courage at a very trying moment.”

“Sincere admiration,” suggested Madame Fosco.

“Sincere admiration,” echoed the Count.

I had no longer the strength of my first angry resistance to outrage and injury to support me. My heart-sick anxiety to see Laura, my sense of my own helpless ignorance of what had happened at the boat-house, pressed on me with an intolerable weight. I tried to keep up appearances by speaking to the Count and his wife in the tone which they had chosen to adopt in speaking to me, but the words failed on my lips—my breath came short and thick—my eyes looked longingly, in silence, at the door. The Count, understanding my anxiety, opened it, went out, and pulled it to after him. At the same time Sir Percival’s heavy step descended the stairs. I heard them whispering together outside, while Madame Fosco was assuring me, in her calmest and most conventional manner, that she rejoiced, for all our sakes, that Sir Percival’s conduct

had not obliged her husband and herself to leave Blackwater Park. Before she had done speaking the whispering ceased, the door opened, and the Count looked in.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She stopped me with a gesture of disgust.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Are you sure it was the Count?”

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

“Is Anne found? Did you see her at the lake?”

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

“Yes? Yes?”

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

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

“How do you know that, Marian?”

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

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

“Where is it?”

“Sir Percival has taken it from me.”

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



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

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

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

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

The reference to the “tall, stout old man” (the terms of which Laura was certain that she had repeated to me correctly) left no doubt as to who the intruder had been. I called to mind that I had told Sir Percival, in the Count’s presence the day before, that Laura had gone to the boat-house to look for her brooch. In all probability he had followed her there, in his officious way, to relieve her mind about the matter of the signature, immediately after he had mentioned the change in Sir Percival’s plans to me in the drawing-room. In this case he could only have got to the neighbourhood of the boat-house at the very moment when Anne Catherick discovered him. The suspiciously hurried manner in which she parted from Laura had no doubt prompted his useless attempt to follow her. Of the conversation which had previously taken place between them he could have heard nothing. The distance between the house and the lake, and the time at which he left me in the drawing-room, as compared with the time at which Laura and Anne Catherick had been speaking together, proved that fact to us at any rate, beyond a doubt.

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

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

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

“Did you try to hide the letter?”



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

“What did he say when you gave it to him?”

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

“Did you tell him?”

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

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

“Why do you want to see it?”

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

“Oh, Marian, don’t look so—don’t talk so! It doesn’t hurt me now!”

“Let me see it!”

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

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

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

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

“Did he say anything when you had done?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What letters?”

“I mean to write first, Laura, to Mr. Gilmore’s partner, who has offered to help us in any fresh emergency. Little as I know of the law, I am certain that it can protect a woman from such treatment as that ruffian has inflicted on you to-day. I will go into no details about Anne Catherick, because I have no certain information to give. But the lawyer shall know of those bruises on your arm, and of the violence offered to you in this room—he shall, before I rest to-night!”

“But think of the exposure, Marian!”

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

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

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

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

Laura shook her head sorrowfully.

“Yes, yes,” I went on, “your uncle is a weak, selfish, worldly man, I know, but he is not Sir Percival Glyde, and he has no such friend about him as Count Fosco. I expect nothing from his kindness or his tenderness of feeling towards you or towards me, but he will do anything to pamper his own indolence, and to secure his own quiet. Let me only persuade him that his interference at this moment will save him inevitable trouble



and wretchedness and responsibility hereafter, and he will bestir himself for his own sake. I know how to deal with him, Laura—I have had some practice.”

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

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

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

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

“Don’t leave me,” she said uneasily. “My desk is on that table. You can write here.”

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

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

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

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

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

