



THE WOMAN
IN WHITE
WILKIE COLLINS



EPOCH TWO

The Story Continued by Marian Halcombe, Part VI

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

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

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

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

My suspicion of everybody and everything in this house inclines me to think that the second plan may be the best. The Count is safe in the breakfast-room. I heard him, through the door, as I ran upstairs ten minutes since, exercising his canary-birds at their tricks:—"Come out on my little finger, my pret-pret-pretties! Come out, and hop



upstairs! One, two, three—and up! Three, two, one—and down! One, two, three—twit-twit-twit-tweet!” The birds burst into their usual ecstasy of singing, and the Count chirruped and whistled at them in return, as if he was a bird himself. My room door is open, and I can hear the shrill singing and whistling at this very moment. If I am really to slip out without being observed, now is my time.

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

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

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

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

The lane outside took a sudden turn to the left, ran on straight for a hundred yards or so, and then took another sharp turn to the right to join the high-road. Between these two turns, hidden from the lodge on one side, and from the way to the station on the other, I waited, walking backwards and forwards. High hedges were on either side of me, and for twenty minutes, by my watch, I neither saw nor heard anything. At the end of that time the sound of a carriage caught my ear, and I was met, as I advanced towards the second turning, by a fly from the railway. I made a sign to the driver to stop. As he obeyed me a respectable-looking man put his head out of the window to see what was the matter.

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

“Yes, ma’am.”

“With a letter for any one?”

“With a letter for Miss Halcombe, ma’am.”

“You may give me the letter. I am Miss Halcombe.”



The man touched his hat, got out of the fly immediately, and gave me the letter. I opened it at once and read these lines. I copy them here, thinking it best to destroy the original for caution's sake.

“DEAR MADAM,—Your letter received this morning has caused me very great anxiety. I will reply to it as briefly and plainly as possible.

“My careful consideration of the statement made by yourself, and my knowledge of Lady Glyde's position, as defined in the settlement, lead me, I regret to say, to the conclusion that a loan of the trust money to Sir Percival (or, in other words, a loan of some portion of the twenty thousand pounds of Lady Glyde's fortune) is in contemplation, and that she is made a party to the deed, in order to secure her approval of a flagrant breach of trust, and to have her signature produced against her if she should complain hereafter. It is impossible, on any other supposition, to account, situated as she is, for her execution to a deed of any kind being wanted at all.

“In the event of Lady Glyde's signing such a document, as I am compelled to suppose the deed in question to be, her trustees would be at liberty to advance money to Sir Percival out of her twenty thousand pounds. If the amount so lent should not be paid back, and if Lady Glyde should have children, their fortune will then be diminished by the sum, large or small, so advanced. In plainer terms still, the transaction, for anything that Lady Glyde knows to the contrary, may be a fraud upon her unborn children.

“Under these serious circumstances, I would recommend Lady Glyde to assign as a reason for withholding her signature, that she wishes the deed to be first submitted to myself, as her family solicitor (in the absence of my partner, Mr. Gilmore). No reasonable objection can be made to taking this course—for, if the transaction is an honourable one, there will necessarily be no difficulty in my giving my approval.

“Sincerely assuring you of my readiness to afford any additional help or advice that may be wanted, I beg to remain, Madam, your faithful servant,

WILLIAM KYRLE.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I took his arm. The first of my scattered senses that came back was the sense that warned me to sacrifice anything rather than make an enemy of him.

“You look surprised at seeing me!” he repeated in his quietly pertinacious way.

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

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

“Certainly.”

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

He talked on in this complimentary strain with a fluency which left me no exertion to make beyond the effort of maintaining my composure. He never referred in the most distant manner to what he had seen in the lane, or to the letter which I still had in my hand. This ominous discretion helped to convince me that he must have surprised, by the most dishonourable means, the secret of my application in Laura’s interest to the lawyer; and that, having now assured himself of the private manner in which I had

received the answer, he had discovered enough to suit his purposes, and was only bent on trying to quiet the suspicions which he knew he must have aroused in my mind. I was wise enough, under these circumstances, not to attempt to deceive him by plausible explanations, and woman enough, notwithstanding my dread of him, to feel as if my hand was tainted by resting on his arm.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What about?”

“About business that very much concerns you.”

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

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

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

Sir Percival descended the steps. The Count took him by the arm, and walked him away gently. The “business,” I was sure, referred to the question of the signature. They were speaking of Laura and of me beyond a doubt. I felt heart-sick and faint with anxiety. It might be of the last importance to both of us to know what they were saying

to each other at that moment, and not one word of it could by any possibility reach my ears.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I saw him for the last time. He was kneeling by a tomb of white marble, and the shadow of a veiled woman rose out of the grave beneath and waited by his side. The unearthly quiet of his face had changed to an unearthly sorrow. But the terrible certainty of his words remained the same. “Darker and darker,” he said; “farther and

farther yet. Death takes the good, the beautiful, and the young—and spares me. The Pestilence that wastes, the Arrow that strikes, the Sea that drowns, the Grave that closes over Love and Hope, are steps of my journey, and take me nearer and nearer to the End.”

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

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

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

“What has happened?” I asked. “What has frightened you?”

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

“Marian!—the figure at the lake—the footsteps last night—I’ve just seen her! I’ve just spoken to her!”

“Who, for Heaven’s sake?”

“Anne Catherick.”

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

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

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

The strange, stunned feeling which had taken possession of me still remained. But a growing conviction that the complications which had long threatened to gather about her, and to gather about me, had suddenly closed fast round us both, was now

beginning to penetrate my mind. I could not express it in words—I could hardly even realise it dimly in my own thoughts. “Anne Catherick!” I whispered to myself, with useless, helpless reiteration—“Anne Catherick!”

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

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

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

“SHE found it, Marian.”

“Where?”

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

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

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

“Shall I close the window?”

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

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

“Miss Fairlie!”

“Yes, my old name—the dear, familiar name that I thought I had parted from for ever. I started up—not frightened, the voice was too kind and gentle to frighten

anybody—but very much surprised. There, looking at me from the doorway, stood a woman, whose face I never remembered to have seen before—”

“How was she dressed?”

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

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

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

“What reminded you of that, Laura?”

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

“Did she seem hurt by your silence?”

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

“Did she do so?”

“No. She shook her head, and told me she must stop where she was, to watch and listen, and see that no third person surprised us. And from first to last, there she waited at the entrance, with a hand on each side of it, sometimes bending in suddenly to speak to me, sometimes drawing back suddenly to look about her. ‘I was here yesterday,’ she said, ‘before it came dark, and I heard you, and the lady with you, talking together. I heard you tell her about your husband. I heard you say you had no influence to make him believe you, and no influence to keep him silent. Ah! I knew what those words meant—my conscience told me while I was listening. Why did I ever let you marry him! Oh, my fear—my mad, miserable, wicked fear!—‘She covered up her face in her poor worn shawl, and moaned and murmured to herself behind it. I began to be afraid she might break out into some terrible despair which neither she nor I could

master. ‘Try to quiet yourself,’ I said; ‘try to tell me how you might have prevented my marriage.’ She took the shawl from her face, and looked at me vacantly. ‘I ought to have had heart enough to stop at Limmeridge,’ she answered. ‘I ought never to have let the news of his coming there frighten me away. I ought to have warned you and saved you before it was too late. Why did I only have courage enough to write you that letter? Why did I only do harm, when I wanted and meant to do good? Oh, my fear—my mad, miserable, wicked fear!’ She repeated those words again, and hid her face again in the end of her poor worn shawl. It was dreadful to see her, and dreadful to hear her.”

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

“Yes, I asked that.”

“And what did she say?”

“She asked me in return, if I should not be afraid of a man who had shut me up in a mad-house, and who would shut me up again, if he could? I said, ‘Are you afraid still? Surely you would not be here if you were afraid now?’ ‘No,’ she said, ‘I am not afraid now.’ I asked why not. She suddenly bent forward into the boat-house, and said, ‘Can’t you guess why?’ I shook my head. ‘Look at me,’ she went on. I told her I was grieved to see that she looked very sorrowful and very ill. She smiled for the first time. ‘Ill?’ she repeated; ‘I’m dying. You know why I’m not afraid of him now. Do you think I shall meet your mother in heaven? Will she forgive me if I do?’ I was so shocked and so startled, that I could make no reply. ‘I have been thinking of it,’ she went on, ‘all the time I have been in hiding from your husband, all the time I lay ill. My thoughts have driven me here—I want to make atonement—I want to undo all I can of the harm I once did.’ I begged her as earnestly as I could to tell me what she meant. She still looked at me with fixed vacant eyes. ‘SHALL I undo the harm?’ she said to herself doubtfully. ‘You have friends to take your part. If YOU know his Secret, he will be afraid of you, he won’t dare use you as he used me. He must treat you mercifully for his own sake, if he is afraid of you and your friends. And if he treats you mercifully, and if I can say it was my doing——’ I listened eagerly for more, but she stopped at those words.”

“You tried to make her go on?”

“I tried, but she only drew herself away from me again, and leaned her face and arms against the side of the boat-house. ‘Oh!’ I heard her say, with a dreadful, distracted tenderness in her voice, ‘oh! if I could only be buried with your mother! If I could only wake at her side, when the angel’s trumpet sounds, and the graves give up their dead at the resurrection!’—Marian! I trembled from head to foot—it was horrible



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

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

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

“And said no more?”

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

“Surely you followed her?”

“Yes, my anxiety made me bold enough to rise and follow her. Just as I reached the entrance, she appeared again suddenly, round the side of the boat-house. ‘The Secret,’ I whispered to her—‘wait and tell me the Secret!’ She caught hold of my arm, and looked at me with wild frightened eyes. ‘Not now,’ she said, ‘we are not alone—we are watched. Come here to-morrow at this time—by yourself—mind—by yourself.’ She pushed me roughly into the boat-house again, and I saw her no more.”

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

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



“Did you run out again? did you call after her?”

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

“But when you DID move—when you came out?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“None that I can remember.”

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

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

“Was that all she said about Mrs. Clements?”

“Yes, that was all.”

“She told you nothing about the place in which she took refuge after leaving Todd’s Corner?”

“Nothing—I am quite sure.”

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

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

“You must do this, my love: You must carefully keep the appointment at the boat-house to-morrow. It is impossible to say what interests may not depend on your seeing that woman again. You shall not be left to yourself a second time. I will follow you at

a safe distance. Nobody shall see me, but I will keep within hearing of your voice, if anything happens. Anne Catherick has escaped Walter Hartright, and has escaped you. Whatever happens, she shall not escape ME.”

Laura’s eyes read mine attentively.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No, but I don't remember——"

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

"Oh, Marian, it sounds too good to be true!"

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

I went away and got the book at once.

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

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

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

* * * * *

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

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

While the aspect under which Sir Percival presented himself to- night was unhappily but too familiar to me, the aspect under which the Count appeared was, on the other hand, entirely new in my experience of him. He permitted me, this evening,

to make his acquaintance, for the first time, in the character of a Man of Sentiment—of sentiment, as I believe, really felt, not assumed for the occasion.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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