



THE WOMAN
IN WHITE
WILKIE COLLINS



EPOCH TWO

The Story Continued by Eliza Michelson, Part II

The next event that occurred was of so singular a nature that it might have caused me a feeling of superstitious surprise, if my mind had not been fortified by principle against any pagan weakness of that sort. The uneasy sense of something wrong in the family which had made me wish myself away from Blackwater Park, was actually followed, strange to say, by my departure from the house. It is true that my absence was for a temporary period only, but the coincidence was, in my opinion, not the less remarkable on that account.

My departure took place under the following circumstances—

A day or two after the servants all left I was again sent for to see Sir Percival. The undeserved slur which he had cast on my management of the household did not, I am happy to say, prevent me from returning good for evil to the best of my ability, by complying with his request as readily and respectfully as ever. It cost me a struggle with that fallen nature, which we all share in common, before I could suppress my feelings. Being accustomed to self-discipline, I accomplished the sacrifice.

I found Sir Percival and Count Fosco sitting together again. On this occasion his lordship remained present at the interview, and assisted in the development of Sir Percival's views.

The subject to which they now requested my attention related to the healthy change of air by which we all hoped that Miss Halcombe and Lady Glyde might soon be enabled to profit. Sir Percival mentioned that both the ladies would probably pass the autumn (by invitation of Frederick Fairlie, Esquire) at Limmeridge House, Cumberland. But before they went there, it was his opinion, confirmed by Count Fosco (who here took up the conversation and continued it to the end), that they would benefit by a short residence first in the genial climate of Torquay. The great object, therefore, was to engage lodgings at that place, affording all the comforts and advantages of which they stood in need, and the great difficulty was to find an experienced person capable of choosing the sort of residence which they wanted. In this emergency the



Count begged to inquire, on Sir Percival's behalf, whether I would object to give the ladies the benefit of my assistance, by proceeding myself to Torquay in their interests.

It was impossible for a person in my situation to meet any proposal, made in these terms, with a positive objection.

I could only venture to represent the serious inconvenience of my leaving Blackwater Park in the extraordinary absence of all the indoor servants, with the one exception of Margaret Porcher. But Sir Percival and his lordship declared that they were both willing to put up with inconvenience for the sake of the invalids. I next respectfully suggested writing to an agent at Torquay, but I was met here by being reminded of the imprudence of taking lodgings without first seeing them. I was also informed that the Countess (who would otherwise have gone to Devonshire herself) could not, in Lady Glyde's present condition, leave her niece, and that Sir Percival and the Count had business to transact together which would oblige them to remain at Blackwater Park. In short, it was clearly shown me that if I did not undertake the errand, no one else could be trusted with it. Under these circumstances, I could only inform Sir Percival that my services were at the disposal of Miss Halcombe and Lady Glyde.

It was thereupon arranged that I should leave the next morning, that I should occupy one or two days in examining all the most convenient houses in Torquay, and that I should return with my report as soon as I conveniently could. A memorandum was written for me by his lordship, stating the requisites which the place I was sent to take must be found to possess, and a note of the pecuniary limit assigned to me was added by Sir Percival.

My own idea on reading over these instructions was, that no such residence as I saw described could be found at any watering-place in England, and that, even if it could by chance be discovered, it would certainly not be parted with for any period on such terms as I was permitted to offer. I hinted at these difficulties to both the gentlemen, but Sir Percival (who undertook to answer me) did not appear to feel them. It was not for me to dispute the question. I said no more, but I felt a very strong conviction that the business on which I was sent away was so beset by difficulties that my errand was almost hopeless at starting.

Before I left I took care to satisfy myself that Miss Halcombe was going on favourably.

There was a painful expression of anxiety in her face which made me fear that her mind, on first recovering itself, was not at ease. But she was certainly strengthening

more rapidly than I could have ventured to anticipate, and she was able to send kind messages to Lady Glyde, saying that she was fast getting well, and entreating her ladyship not to exert herself again too soon. I left her in charge of Mrs. Rubelle, who was still as quietly independent of every one else in the house as ever. When I knocked at Lady Glyde's door before going away, I was told that she was still sadly weak and depressed, my informant being the Countess, who was then keeping her company in her room. Sir Percival and the Count were walking on the road to the lodge as I was driven by in the chaise. I bowed to them and quitted the house, with not a living soul left in the servants' offices but Margaret Porcher.

Every one must feel what I have felt myself since that time, that these circumstances were more than unusual—they were! almost suspicious. Let me, however, say again that it was impossible for me, in my dependent position, to act otherwise than I did.

The result of my errand at Torquay was exactly what I had foreseen. No such lodgings as I was instructed to take could be found in the whole place, and the terms I was permitted to give were much too low for the purpose, even if I had been able to discover what I wanted. I accordingly returned to Blackwater Park, and informed Sir Percival, who met me at the door, that my journey had been taken in vain. He seemed too much occupied with some other subject to care about the failure of my errand, and his first words informed me that even in the short time of my absence another remarkable change had taken place in the house.

The Count and Countess Fosco had left Blackwater Park for their new residence in St. John's Wood.

I was not made aware of the motive for this sudden departure—I was only told that the Count had been very particular in leaving his kind compliments to me. When I ventured on asking Sir Percival whether Lady Glyde had any one to attend to her comforts in the absence of the Countess, he replied that she had Margaret Porcher to wait on her, and he added that a woman from the village had been sent for to do the work downstairs.

The answer really shocked me—there was such a glaring impropriety in permitting an under-housemaid to fill the place of confidential attendant on Lady Glyde. I went upstairs at once, and met Margaret on the bedroom landing. Her services had not been required (naturally enough), her mistress having sufficiently recovered that morning to be able to leave her bed. I asked next after Miss Halcombe, but I was answered in a slouching, sulky way, which left me no wiser than I was before.

I did not choose to repeat the question, and perhaps provoke an impertinent reply. It was in every respect more becoming to a person in my position to present myself immediately in Lady Glyde's room.

I found that her ladyship had certainly gained in health during the last few days. Although still sadly weak and nervous, she was able to get up without assistance, and to walk slowly about her room, feeling no worse effect from the exertion than a slight sensation of fatigue. She had been made a little anxious that morning about Miss Halcombe, through having received no news of her from any one. I thought this seemed to imply a blamable want of attention on the part of Mrs. Rubelle, but I said nothing, and remained with Lady Glyde to assist her to dress. When she was ready we both left the room together to go to Miss Halcombe.

We were stopped in the passage by the appearance of Sir Percival. He looked as if he had been purposely waiting there to see us.

"Where are you going?" he said to Lady Glyde.

"To Marian's room," she answered.

"It may spare you a disappointment," remarked Sir Percival, "if I tell you at once that you will not find her there."

"Not find her there!"

"No. She left the house yesterday morning with Fosco and his wife."

Lady Glyde was not strong enough to bear the surprise of this extraordinary statement. She turned fearfully pale, and leaned back against the wall, looking at her husband in dead silence.

I was so astonished myself that I hardly knew what to say. I asked Sir Percival if he really meant that Miss Halcombe had left Blackwater Park.

"I certainly mean it," he answered.

"In her state, Sir Percival! Without mentioning her intentions to Lady Glyde!"

Before he could reply her ladyship recovered herself a little and spoke.

"Impossible!" she cried out in a loud, frightened manner, taking a step or two forward from the wall. "Where was the doctor? where was Mr. Dawson when Marian went away?"

"Mr. Dawson wasn't wanted, and wasn't here," said Sir Percival. "He left of his own accord, which is enough of itself to show that she was strong enough to travel. How you stare! If you don't believe she has gone, look for yourself. Open her room door, and all the other room doors if you like."

She took him at his word, and I followed her. There was no one in Miss Halcombe's room but Margaret Porcher, who was busy setting it to rights. There was no one in the spare rooms or the dressing-rooms when we looked into them afterwards. Sir Percival still waited for us in the passage. As we were leaving the last room that we had examined Lady Glyde whispered, "Don't go, Mrs. Michelson! don't leave me, for God's sake!" Before I could say anything in return she was out again in the passage, speaking to her husband.

"What does it mean, Sir Percival? I insist—I beg and pray you will tell me what it means."

"It means," he answered, "that Miss Halcombe was strong enough yesterday morning to sit up and be dressed, and that she insisted on taking advantage of Fosco's going to London to go there too."

"To London!"

"Yes—on her way to Limmeridge."

Lady Glyde turned and appealed to me.

"You saw Miss Halcombe last," she said. "Tell me plainly, Mrs. Michelson, did you think she looked fit to travel?"

"Not in MY opinion, your ladyship."

Sir Percival, on his side, instantly turned and appealed to me also.

"Before you went away," he said, "did you, or did you not, tell the nurse that Miss Halcombe looked much stronger and better?"

"I certainly made the remark, Sir Percival."

He addressed her ladyship again the moment I offered that reply.

"Set one of Mrs. Michelson's opinions fairly against the other," he said, "and try to be reasonable about a perfectly plain matter. If she had not been well enough to be moved do you think we should any of us have risked letting her go? She has got three competent people to look after her—Fosco and your aunt, and Mrs. Rubelle, who went away with them expressly for that purpose. They took a whole carriage yesterday, and made a bed for her on the seat in case she felt tired. To-day, Fosco and Mrs. Rubelle go on with her themselves to Cumberland."

"Why does Marian go to Limmeridge and leave me here by myself?" said her ladyship, interrupting Sir Percival.

"Because your uncle won't receive you till he has seen your sister first," he replied. "Have you forgotten the letter he wrote to her at the beginning of her illness? It was shown to you, you read it yourself, and you ought to remember it."

“I do remember it.”

“If you do, why should you be surprised at her leaving you? You want to be back at Limmeridge, and she has gone there to get your uncle’s leave for you on his own terms.”

Poor Lady Glyde’s eyes filled with tears.

“Marian never left me before,” she said, “without bidding me good- bye.”

“She would have bid you good-bye this time,” returned Sir Percival, “if she had not been afraid of herself and of you. She knew you would try to stop her, she knew you would distress her by crying. Do you want to make any more objections? If you do, you must come downstairs and ask questions in the dining-room. These worries upset me. I want a glass of wine.”

He left us suddenly.

His manner all through this strange conversation had been very unlike what it usually was. He seemed to be almost as nervous and fluttered, every now and then, as his lady herself. I should never have supposed that his health had been so delicate, or his composure so easy to upset.

I tried to prevail on Lady Glyde to go back to her room, but it was useless. She stopped in the passage, with the look of a woman whose mind was panic-stricken.

“Something has happened to my sister!” she said.

“Remember, my lady, what surprising energy there is in Miss Halcombe,” I suggested. “She might well make an effort which other ladies in her situation would be unfit for. I hope and believe there is nothing wrong—I do indeed.”

“I must follow Marian,” said her ladyship, with the same panic- stricken look. “I must go where she has gone, I must see that she is alive and well with my own eyes. Come! come down with me to Sir Percival.”

I hesitated, fearing that my presence might be considered an intrusion. I attempted to represent this to her ladyship, but she was deaf to me. She held my arm fast enough to force me to go downstairs with her, and she still clung to me with all the little strength she had at the moment when I opened the dining-room door.

Sir Percival was sitting at the table with a decanter of wine before him. He raised the glass to his lips as we went in and drained it at a draught. Seeing that he looked at me angrily when he put it down again, I attempted to make some apology for my accidental presence in the room.

“Do you suppose there are any secrets going on here?” he broke out suddenly; “there are none—there is nothing underhand, nothing kept from you or from any one.”

After speaking those strange words loudly and sternly, he filled himself another glass of wine and asked Lady Glyde what she wanted of him.

“If my sister is fit to travel I am fit to travel” said her ladyship, with more firmness than she had yet shown. “I come to beg you will make allowances for my anxiety about Marian, and let me follow her at once by the afternoon train.”

“You must wait till to-morrow,” replied Sir Percival, “and then if you don’t hear to the contrary you can go. I don’t suppose you are at all likely to hear to the contrary, so I shall write to Fosco by to-night’s post.”

He said those last words holding his glass up to the light, and looking at the wine in it instead of at Lady Glyde. Indeed he never once looked at her throughout the conversation. Such a singular want of good breeding in a gentleman of his rank impressed me, I own, very painfully.

“Why should you write to Count Fosco?” she asked, in extreme surprise.

“To tell him to expect you by the midday train,” said Sir Percival. “He will meet you at the station when you get to London, and take you on to sleep at your aunt’s in St. John’s Wood.”

Lady Glyde’s hand began to tremble violently round my arm—why I could not imagine.

“There is no necessity for Count Fosco to meet me,” she said. “I would rather not stay in London to sleep.”

“You must. You can’t take the whole journey to Cumberland in one day. You must rest a night in London—and I don’t choose you to go by yourself to an hotel. Fosco made the offer to your uncle to give you house-room on the way down, and your uncle has accepted it. Here! here is a letter from him addressed to yourself. I ought to have sent it up this morning, but I forgot. Read it and see what Mr. Fairlie himself says to you.”

Lady Glyde looked at the letter for a moment and then placed it in my hands.

“Read it,” she said faintly. “I don’t know what is the matter with me. I can’t read it myself.”

It was a note of only four lines—so short and so careless that it quite struck me. If I remember correctly it contained no more than these words—

“Dearest Laura, Please come whenever you like. Break the journey by sleeping at your aunt’s house. Grieved to hear of dear Marian’s illness. Affectionately yours,
Frederick Fairlie.”

“I would rather not go there—I would rather not stay a night in London,” said her ladyship, breaking out eagerly with those words before I had quite done reading the note, short as it was. “Don’t write to Count Fosco! Pray, pray don’t write to him!”

Sir Percival filled another glass from the decanter so awkwardly that he upset it and spilt all the wine over the table. “My sight seems to be failing me,” he muttered to himself, in an odd, muffled voice. He slowly set the glass up again, refilled it, and drained it once more at a draught. I began to fear, from his look and manner, that the wine was getting into his head.

“Pray don’t write to Count Fosco,” persisted Lady Glyde, more earnestly than ever.

“Why not, I should like to know?” cried Sir Percival, with a sudden burst of anger that startled us both. “Where can you stay more properly in London than at the place your uncle himself chooses for you—at your aunt’s house? Ask Mrs. Michelson.”

The arrangement proposed was so unquestionably the right and the proper one, that I could make no possible objection to it. Much as I sympathised with Lady Glyde in other respects, I could not sympathise with her in her unjust prejudices against Count Fosco. I never before met with any lady of her rank and station who was so lamentably narrow-minded on the subject of foreigners. Neither her uncle’s note nor Sir Percival’s increasing impatience seemed to have the least effect on her. She still objected to staying a night in London, she still implored her husband not to write to the Count.

“Drop it!” said Sir Percival, rudely turning his back on us. “If you haven’t sense enough to know what is best for yourself other people must know it for you. The arrangement is made and there is an end of it. You are only wanted to do what Miss Halcombe has done for you—”

“Marian?” repeated her Ladyship, in a bewildered manner; “Marian sleeping in Count Fosco’s house!”

“Yes, in Count Fosco’s house. She slept there last night to break the journey, and you are to follow her example, and do what your uncle tells you. You are to sleep at Fosco’s to-morrow night, as your sister did, to break the journey. Don’t throw too many obstacles in my way! don’t make me repent of letting you go at all!”

He started to his feet, and suddenly walked out into the verandah through the open glass doors.

“Will your ladyship excuse me,” I whispered, “if I suggest that we had better not wait here till Sir Percival comes back? I am very much afraid he is over-excited with wine.”

She consented to leave the room in a weary, absent manner.



As soon as we were safe upstairs again, I did all I could to compose her ladyship's spirits. I reminded her that Mr. Fairlie's letters to Miss Halcombe and to herself did certainly sanction, and even render necessary, sooner or later, the course that had been taken. She agreed to this, and even admitted, of her own accord, that both letters were strictly in character with her uncle's peculiar disposition—but her fears about Miss Halcombe, and her unaccountable dread of sleeping at the Count's house in London, still remained unshaken in spite of every consideration that I could urge. I thought it my duty to protest against Lady Glyde's unfavourable opinion of his lordship, and I did so, with becoming forbearance and respect.

"Your ladyship will pardon my freedom," I remarked, in conclusion, "but it is said, 'by their fruits ye shall know them.' I am sure the Count's constant kindness and constant attention, from the very beginning of Miss Halcombe's illness, merit our best confidence and esteem. Even his lordship's serious misunderstanding with Mr. Dawson was entirely attributable to his anxiety on Miss Halcombe's account."

"What misunderstanding?" inquired her ladyship, with a look of sudden interest.

I related the unhappy circumstances under which Mr. Dawson had withdrawn his attendance—mentioning them all the more readily because I disapproved of Sir Percival's continuing to conceal what had happened (as he had done in my presence) from the knowledge of Lady Glyde.

Her ladyship started up, with every appearance of being additionally agitated and alarmed by what I had told her.

"Worse! worse than I thought!" she said, walking about the room, in a bewildered manner. "The Count knew Mr. Dawson would never consent to Marian's taking a journey—he purposely insulted the doctor to get him out of the house."

"Oh, my lady! my lady!" I remonstrated.

"Mrs. Michelson!" she went on vehemently, "no words that ever were spoken will persuade me that my sister is in that man's power and in that man's house with her own consent. My horror of him is such, that nothing Sir Percival could say and no letters my uncle could write, would induce me, if I had only my own feelings to consult, to eat, drink, or sleep under his roof. Put my misery of suspense about Marian gives me the courage to follow her anywhere, to follow her even into Count Fosco's house."

I thought it right, at this point, to mention that Miss Halcombe had already gone on to Cumberland, according to Sir Percival's account of the matter.

"I am afraid to believe it!" answered her ladyship. "I am afraid she is still in that man's house. If I am wrong, if she has really gone on to Limmeridge, I am resolved

I will not sleep to-morrow night under Count Fosco's roof. My dearest friend in the world, next to my sister, lives near London. You have heard me, you have heard Miss Halcombe, speak of Mrs. Vesey? I mean to write, and propose to sleep at her house. I don't know how I shall get there—I don't know how I shall avoid the Count—but to that refuge I will escape in some way, if my sister has gone to Cumberland. All I ask of you to do, is to see yourself that my letter to Mrs. Vesey goes to London to-night, as certainly as Sir Percival's letter goes to Count Fosco. I have reasons for not trusting the post-bag downstairs. Will you keep my secret, and help me in this? it is the last favour, perhaps, that I shall ever ask of you."

I hesitated, I thought it all very strange, I almost feared that her ladyship's mind had been a little affected by recent anxiety and suffering. At my own risk, however, I ended by giving my consent. If the letter had been addressed to a stranger, or to any one but a lady so well known to me by report as Mrs. Vesey, I might have refused. I thank God—looking to what happened afterwards—I thank God I never thwarted that wish, or any other, which Lady Glyde expressed to me, on the last day of her residence at Blackwater Park.

The letter was written and given into my hands. I myself put it into the post-box in the village that evening.

We saw nothing more of Sir Percival for the rest of the day.

I slept, by Lady Glyde's own desire, in the next room to hers, with the door open between us. There was something so strange and dreadful in the loneliness and emptiness of the house, that I was glad, on my side, to have a companion near me. Her ladyship sat up late, reading letters and burning them, and emptying her drawers and cabinets of little things she prized, as if she never expected to return to Blackwater Park. Her sleep was sadly disturbed when she at last went to bed—she cried out in it several times, once so loud that she woke herself. Whatever her dreams were, she did not think fit to communicate them to me. Perhaps, in my situation, I had no right to expect that she should do so. It matters little now. I was sorry for her, I was indeed heartily sorry for her all the same.

The next day was fine and sunny. Sir Percival came up, after breakfast, to tell us that the chaise would be at the door at a quarter to twelve—the train to London stopping at our station at twenty minutes after. He informed Lady Glyde that he was obliged to go out, but added that he hoped to be back before she left. If any unforeseen accident delayed him, I was to accompany her to the station, and to take special care that she was in time for the train. Sir Percival communicated these directions very

hastily— walking here and there about the room all the time. Her ladyship looked attentively after him wherever he went. He never once looked at her in return.

She only spoke when he had done, and then she stopped him as he approached the door, by holding out her hand.

“I shall see you no more,” she said, in a very marked manner. “This is our parting—our parting, it may be for ever. Will you try to forgive me, Percival, as heartily as I forgive YOU?”

His face turned of an awful whiteness all over, and great beads of perspiration broke out on his bald forehead. “I shall come back,” he said, and made for the door, as hastily as if his wife’s farewell words had frightened him out of the room.

I had never liked Sir Percival, but the manner in which he left Lady Glyde made me feel ashamed of having eaten his bread and lived in his service. I thought of saying a few comforting and Christian words to the poor lady, but there was something in her face, as she looked after her husband when the door closed on him, that made me alter my mind and keep silence.

At the time named the chaise drew up at the gates. Her ladyship was right—Sir Percival never came back. I waited for him till the last moment, and waited in vain.

No positive responsibility lay on my shoulders, and yet I did not feel easy in my mind. “It is of your own free will,” I said, as the chaise drove through the lodge-gates, “that your ladyship goes to London?”

“I will go anywhere,” she answered, “to end the dreadful suspense that I am suffering at this moment.”

She had made me feel almost as anxious and as uncertain about Miss Halcombe as she felt herself. I presumed to ask her to write me a line, if all went well in London. She answered, “Most willingly, Mrs. Michelson.”

“We all have our crosses to bear, my lady,” I said, seeing her silent and thoughtful, after she had promised to write.

She made no reply—she seemed to be too much wrapped up in her own thoughts to attend to me.

“I fear your ladyship rested badly last night,” I remarked, after waiting a little.

“Yes,” she said, “I was terribly disturbed by dreams.”

“Indeed, my lady?” I thought she was going to tell me her dreams, but no, when she spoke next it was only to ask a question.

“You posted the letter to Mrs. Vesey with your own hands?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“Did Sir Percival say, yesterday, that Count Fosco was to meet me at the terminus in London?”

“He did, my lady.”

She sighed heavily when I answered that last question, and said no more.

We arrived at the station, with hardly two minutes to spare. The gardener (who had driven us) managed about the luggage, while I took the ticket. The whistle of the train was sounding when I joined her ladyship on the platform. She looked very strangely, and pressed her hand over her heart, as if some sudden pain or fright had overcome her at that moment.

“I wish you were going with me!” she said, catching eagerly at my arm when I gave her the ticket.

If there had been time, if I had felt the day before as I felt then, I would have made my arrangements to accompany her, even though the doing so had obliged me to give Sir Percival warning on the spot. As it was, her wishes, expressed at the last moment only, were expressed too late for me to comply with them. She seemed to understand this herself before I could explain it, and did not repeat her desire to have me for a travelling companion. The train drew up at the platform. She gave the gardener a present for his children, and took my hand, in her simple hearty manner, before she got into the carriage.

“You have been very kind to me and to my sister,” she said—“kind when we were both friendless. I shall remember you gratefully, as long as I live to remember any one. Good-bye—and God bless you!”

She spoke those words with a tone and a look which brought the tears into my eyes—she spoke them as if she was bidding me farewell for ever.

“Good-bye, my lady,” I said, putting her into the carriage, and trying to cheer her; “good-bye, for the present only; good-bye, with my best and kindest wishes for happier times.”

She shook her head, and shuddered as she settled herself in the carriage. The guard closed the door. “Do you believe in dreams?” she whispered to me at the window. “My dreams, last night, were dreams I have never had before. The terror of them is hanging over me still.” The whistle sounded before I could answer, and the train moved. Her pale quiet face looked at me for the last time—looked sorrowfully and solemnly from the window. She waved her hand, and I saw her no more.

Towards five o’clock on the afternoon of that same day, having a little time to myself in the midst of the household duties which now pressed upon me, I sat down



alone in my own room, to try and compose my mind with the volume of my husband's Sermons. For the first time in my life I found my attention wandering over those pious and cheering words. Concluding that Lady Glyde's departure must have disturbed me far more seriously than I had myself supposed, I put the book aside, and went out to take a turn in the garden. Sir Percival had not yet returned, to my knowledge, so I could feel no hesitation about showing myself in the grounds.

On turning the corner of the house, and gaining a view of the garden, I was startled by seeing a stranger walking in it. The stranger was a woman—she was lounging along the path with her back to me, and was gathering the flowers.

As I approached she heard me, and turned round.

My blood curdled in my veins. The strange woman in the garden was Mrs. Rubelle!

I could neither move nor speak. She came up to me, as composedly as ever, with her flowers in her hand.

"What is the matter, ma'am?" she said quietly.

"You here!" I gasped out. "Not gone to London! Not gone to Cumberland!"

Mrs. Rubelle smelt at her flowers with a smile of malicious pity.

"Certainly not," she said. "I have never left Blackwater Park."

I summoned breath enough and courage enough for another question.

"Where is Miss Halcombe?"

Mrs. Rubelle fairly laughed at me this time, and replied in these words—

"Miss Halcombe, ma'am, has not left Blackwater Park either."

When I heard that astounding answer, all my thoughts were startled back on the instant to my parting with Lady Glyde. I can hardly say I reproached myself, but at that moment I think I would have given many a year's hard savings to have known four hours earlier what I knew now.

Mrs. Rubelle waited, quietly arranging her nosegay, as if she expected me to say something.

I could say nothing. I thought of Lady Glyde's worn-out energies and weakly health, and I trembled for the time when the shock of the discovery that I had made would fall on her. For a minute or more my fears for the poor ladies silenced me. At the end of that time Mrs. Rubelle looked up sideways from her flowers, and said, "Here is Sir Percival, ma'am, returned from his ride."

I saw him as soon as she did. He came towards us, slashing viciously at the flowers with his riding-whip. When he was near enough to see my face he stopped, struck at his



boot with the whip, and burst out laughing, so harshly and so violently that the birds flew away, startled, from the tree by which he stood.

“Well, Mrs. Michelson,” he said, “you have found it out at last, have you?”

I made no reply. He turned to Mrs. Rubelle.

“When did you show yourself in the garden?”

“I showed myself about half an hour ago, sir. You said I might take my liberty again as soon as Lady Glyde had gone away to London.”

“Quite right. I don’t blame you—I only asked the question.” He waited a moment, and then addressed himself once more to me. “You can’t believe it, can you?” he said mockingly. “Here! come along and see for yourself.”

He led the way round to the front of the house. I followed him, and Mrs. Rubelle followed me. After passing through the iron gates he stopped, and pointed with his whip to the disused middle wing of the building.

“There!” he said. “Look up at the first floor. You know the old Elizabethan bedrooms? Miss Halcombe is snug and safe in one of the best of them at this moment. Take her in, Mrs. Rubelle (you have got your key?); take Mrs. Michelson in, and let her own eyes satisfy her that there is no deception this time.”

The tone in which he spoke to me, and the minute or two that had passed since we left the garden, helped me to recover my spirits a little. What I might have done at this critical moment, if all my life had been passed in service, I cannot say. As it was, possessing the feelings, the principles, and the bringing up of a lady, I could not hesitate about the right course to pursue. My duty to myself, and my duty to Lady Glyde, alike forbade me to remain in the employment of a man who had shamefully deceived us both by a series of atrocious falsehoods.

“I must beg permission, Sir Percival, to speak a few words to you in private,” I said. “Having done so, I shall be ready to proceed with this person to Miss Halcombe’s room.”

Mrs. Rubelle, whom I had indicated by a slight turn of my head, insolently sniffed at her nosegay and walked away, with great deliberation, towards the house door.

“Well,” said Sir Percival sharply, “what is it now?”

“I wish to mention, sir, that I am desirous of resigning the situation I now hold at Blackwater Park.” That was literally how I put it. I was resolved that the first words spoken in his presence should be words which expressed my intention to leave his service.

He eyed me with one of his blackest looks, and thrust his hands savagely into the pockets of his riding-coat.

“Why?” he said, “why, I should like to know?”

“It is not for me, Sir Percival, to express an opinion on what has taken place in this house. I desire to give no offence. I merely wish to say that I do not feel it consistent with my duty to Lady Glyde and to myself to remain any longer in your service.”

“Is it consistent with your duty to me to stand there, casting suspicion on me to my face?” he broke out in his most violent manner. “I see what you’re driving at. You have taken your own mean, underhand view of an innocent deception practised on Lady Glyde for her own good. It was essential to her health that she should have a change of air immediately, and you know as well as I do she would never have gone away if she had been told Miss Halcombe was still left here. She has been deceived in her own interests—and I don’t care who knows it. Go, if you like—there are plenty of housekeepers as good as you to be had for the asking. Go when you please—but take care how you spread scandals about me and my affairs when you’re out of my service. Tell the truth, and nothing but the truth, or it will be the worse for you! See Miss Halcombe for yourself—see if she hasn’t been as well taken care of in one part of the house as in the other. Remember the doctor’s own orders that Lady Glyde was to have a change of air at the earliest possible opportunity. Bear all that well in mind, and then say anything against me and my proceedings if you dare!”

He poured out these words fiercely, all in a breath, walking backwards and forwards, and striking about him in the air with his whip.

Nothing that he said or did shook my opinion of the disgraceful series of falsehoods that he had told in my presence the day before, or of the cruel deception by which he had separated Lady Glyde from her sister, and had sent her uselessly to London, when she was half distracted with anxiety on Miss Halcombe’s account. I naturally kept these thoughts to myself, and said nothing more to irritate him; but I was not the less resolved to persist in my purpose. A soft answer turneth away wrath, and I suppressed my own feelings accordingly when it was my turn to reply.

“While I am in your service, Sir Percival,” I said, “I hope I know my duty well enough not to inquire into your motives. When I am out of your service, I hope I know my own place well enough not to speak of matters which don’t concern me ”

“When do you want to go?” he asked, interrupting me without ceremony. “Don’t suppose I am anxious to keep you—don’t suppose I care about your leaving the house. I am perfectly fair and open in this matter, from first to last. When do you want to go?”

“I should wish to leave at your earliest convenience, Sir Percival.”

“My convenience has nothing to do with it. I shall be out of the house for good and all to-morrow morning, and I can settle your accounts to-night. If you want to study anybody’s convenience, it had better be Miss Halcombe’s. Mrs. Rubelle’s time is up to-day, and she has reasons for wishing to be in London to-night. If you go at once, Miss Halcombe won’t have a soul left here to look after her.”

I hope it is unnecessary for me to say that I was quite incapable of deserting Miss Halcombe in such an emergency as had now befallen Lady Glyde and herself. After first distinctly ascertaining from Sir Percival that Mrs. Rubelle was certain to leave at once if I took her place, and after also obtaining permission to arrange for Mr. Dawson’s resuming his attendance on his patient, I willingly consented to remain at Blackwater Park until Miss Halcombe no longer required my services. It was settled that I should give Sir Percival’s solicitor a week’s notice before I left, and that he was to undertake the necessary arrangements for appointing my successor. The matter was discussed in very few words. At its conclusion Sir Percival abruptly turned on his heel, and left me free to join Mrs. Rubelle. That singular foreign person had been sitting composedly on the doorstep all this time, waiting till I could follow her to Miss Halcombe’s room.

I had hardly walked half-way towards the house when Sir Percival, who had withdrawn in the opposite direction, suddenly stopped and called me back.

“Why are you leaving my service?” he asked.

The question was so extraordinary, after what had just passed between us, that I hardly knew what to say in answer to it.

“Mind! I don’t know why you are going,” he went on. “You must give a reason for leaving me, I suppose, when you get another situation. What reason? The breaking up of the family? Is that it?”

“There can be no positive objection, Sir Percival, to that reason——”

“Very well! That’s all I want to know. If people apply for your character, that’s your reason, stated by yourself. You go in consequence of the breaking up of the family.”

He turned away again before I could say another word, and walked out rapidly into the grounds. His manner was as strange as his language. I acknowledge he alarmed me.

Even the patience of Mrs. Rubelle was getting exhausted, when I joined her at the house door.

“At last!” she said, with a shrug of her lean foreign shoulders. She led the way into the inhabited side of the house, ascended the stairs, and opened with her key the door at the end of the passage, which communicated with the old Elizabethan rooms—a door never previously used, in my time, at Blackwater Park. The rooms themselves I knew well, having entered them myself on various occasions from the other side of the house. Mrs. Rubelle stopped at the third door along the old gallery, handed me the key of it, with the key of the door of communication, and told me I should find Miss Halcombe in that room. Before I went in I thought it desirable to make her understand that her attendance had ceased. Accordingly, I told her in plain words that the charge of the sick lady henceforth devolved entirely on myself.

“I am glad to hear it, ma’am,” said Mrs. Rubelle. “I want to go very much.”

“Do you leave to-day?” I asked, to make sure of her.

“Now that you have taken charge, ma’am, I leave in half an hour’s time. Sir Percival has kindly placed at my disposition the gardener, and the chaise, whenever I want them. I shall want them in half an hour’s time to go to the station. I am packed up in anticipation already. I wish you good-day, ma’am.”

She dropped a brisk curtsey, and walked back along the gallery, humming a little tune, and keeping time to it cheerfully with the nosegay in her hand. I am sincerely thankful to say that was the last I saw of Mrs. Rubelle.

When I went into the room Miss Halcombe was asleep. I looked at her anxiously, as she lay in the dismal, high, old-fashioned bed. She was certainly not in any respect altered for the worse since I had seen her last. She had not been neglected, I am bound to admit, in any way that I could perceive. The room was dreary, and dusty, and dark, but the window (looking on a solitary court-yard at the back of the house) was opened to let in the fresh air, and all that could be done to make the place comfortable had been done. The whole cruelty of Sir Percival’s deception had fallen on poor Lady Glyde. The only ill-usage which either he or Mrs. Rubelle had inflicted on Miss Halcombe consisted, so far as I could see, in the first offence of hiding her away.

I stole back, leaving the sick lady still peacefully asleep, to give the gardener instructions about bringing the doctor. I begged the man, after he had taken Mrs. Rubelle to the station, to drive round by Mr. Dawson’s, and leave a message in my name, asking him to call and see me. I knew he would come on my account, and I knew he would remain when he found Count Fosco had left the house.

In due course of time the gardener returned, and said that he had driven round by Mr. Dawson’s residence, after leaving Mrs. Rubelle at the station. The doctor sent me



word that he was poorly in health himself, but that he would call, if possible, the next morning.

Having delivered his message the gardener was about to withdraw, but I stopped him to request that he would come back before dark, and sit up that night, in one of the empty bedrooms, so as to be within call in case I wanted him. He understood readily enough my unwillingness to be left alone all night in the most desolate part of that desolate house, and we arranged that he should come in between eight and nine.

He came punctually, and I found cause to be thankful that I had adopted the precaution of calling him in. Before midnight Sir Percival's strange temper broke out in the most violent and most alarming manner, and if the gardener had not been on the spot to pacify him on the instant, I am afraid to think what might have happened.

Almost all the afternoon and evening he had been walking about the house and grounds in an unsettled, excitable manner, having, in all probability, as I thought, taken an excessive quantity of wine at his solitary dinner. However that may be, I heard his voice calling loudly and angrily in the new wing of the house, as I was taking a turn backwards and forwards along the gallery the last thing at night. The gardener immediately ran down to him, and I closed the door of communication, to keep the alarm, if possible, from reaching Miss Halcombe's ears. It was full half an hour before the gardener came back. He declared that his master was quite out of his senses—not through the excitement of drink, as I had supposed, but through a kind of panic or frenzy of mind, for which it was impossible to account. He had found Sir Percival walking backwards and forwards by himself in the hall, swearing, with every appearance of the most violent passion, that he would not stop another minute alone in such a dungeon as his own house, and that he would take the first stage of his journey immediately in the middle of the night. The gardener, on approaching him, had been hunted out, with oaths and threats, to get the horse and chaise ready instantly. In a quarter of an hour Sir Percival had joined him in the yard, had jumped into the chaise, and, lashing the horse into a gallop, had driven himself away, with his face as pale as ashes in the moonlight. The gardener had heard him shouting and cursing at the lodge-keeper to get up and open the gate—had heard the wheels roll furiously on again in the still night, when the gate was unlocked—and knew no more.

The next day, or a day or two after, I forget which, the chaise was brought back from Knowlesbury, our nearest town, by the ostler at the old inn. Sir Percival had stopped there, and had afterwards left by the train—for what destination the man could not tell. I never received any further information, either from himself or from any one

else, of Sir Percival's proceedings, and I am not even aware, at this moment, whether he is in England or out of it. He and I have not met since he drove away like an escaped criminal from his own house, and it is my fervent hope and prayer that we may never meet again.

My own part of this sad family story is now drawing to an end.

I have been informed that the particulars of Miss Halcombe's waking, and of what passed between us when she found me sitting by her bedside, are not material to the purpose which is to be answered by the present narrative. It will be sufficient for me to say in this place, that she was not herself conscious of the means adopted to remove her from the inhabited to the uninhabited part of the house. She was in a deep sleep at the time, whether naturally or artificially produced she could not say. In my absence at Torquay, and in the absence of all the resident servants except Margaret Porcher (who was perpetually eating, drinking, or sleeping, when she was not at work), the secret transfer of Miss Halcombe from one part of the house to the other was no doubt easily performed. Mrs. Rubelle (as I discovered for myself, in looking about the room) had provisions, and all other necessaries, together with the means of heating water, broth, and so on, without kindling a fire, placed at her disposal during the few days of her imprisonment with the sick lady. She had declined to answer the questions which Miss Halcombe naturally put, but had not, in other respects, treated her with unkindness or neglect. The disgrace of lending herself to a vile deception is the only disgrace with which I can conscientiously charge Mrs. Rubelle.

I need write no particulars (and I am relieved to know it) of the effect produced on Miss Halcombe by the news of Lady Glyde's departure, or by the far more melancholy tidings which reached us only too soon afterwards at Blackwater Park. In both cases I prepared her mind beforehand as gently and as carefully as possible, having the doctor's advice to guide me, in the last case only, through Mr. Dawson's being too unwell to come to the house for some days after I had sent for him. It was a sad time, a time which it afflicts me to think of or to write of now. The precious blessings of religious consolation which I endeavoured to convey were long in reaching Miss Halcombe's heart, but I hope and believe they came home to her at last. I never left her till her strength was restored. The train which took me away from that miserable house was the train which took her away also. We parted very mournfully in London. I remained with a relative at Islington, and she went on to Mr. Fairlie's house in Cumberland.

I have only a few lines more to write before I close this painful statement. They are dictated by a sense of duty.

In the first place, I wish to record my own personal conviction that no blame whatever, in connection with the events which I have now related, attaches to Count Fosco. I am informed that a dreadful suspicion has been raised, and that some very serious constructions are placed upon his lordship's conduct. My persuasion of the Count's innocence remains, however, quite unshaken. If he assisted Sir Percival in sending me to Torquay, he assisted under a delusion, for which, as a foreigner and a stranger, he was not to blame. If he was concerned in bringing Mrs. Rubelle to Blackwater Park, it was his misfortune and not his fault, when that foreign person was base enough to assist a deception planned and carried out by the master of the house. I protest, in the interests of morality, against blame being gratuitously and wantonly attached to the proceedings of the Count.

In the second place, I desire to express my regret at my own inability to remember the precise day on which Lady Glyde left Blackwater Park for London. I am told that it is of the last importance to ascertain the exact date of that lamentable journey, and I have anxiously taxed my memory to recall it. The effort has been in vain. I can only remember now that it was towards the latter part of July. We all know the difficulty, after a lapse of time, of fixing precisely on a past date unless it has been previously written down. That difficulty is greatly increased in my case by the alarming and confusing events which took place about the period of Lady Glyde's departure. I heartily wish I had made a memorandum at the time. I heartily wish my memory of the date was as vivid as my memory of that poor lady's face, when it looked at me sorrowfully for the last time from the carriage window.

