

THE STORY CONTINUED BY VINCENT GILMORE

(of Chancery Lane, Solicitor)

I

I write these lines at the request of my friend, Mr. Walter Hartright. They are intended to convey a description of certain events which seriously affected Miss Fairlie's interests, and which took place after the period of Mr. Hartright's departure from Limmeridge House.

There is no need for me to say whether my own opinion does or does not sanction the disclosure of the remarkable family story, of which my narrative forms an important component part. Mr. Hartright has taken that responsibility on himself, and circumstances yet to be related will show that he has amply earned the right to do so, if he chooses to exercise it. The plan he has adopted for presenting the story to others, in the most truthful and most vivid manner, requires that it should be told, at each successive stage in the march of events, by the persons who were directly concerned in those events at the time of their occurrence. My appearance here, as narrator, is the necessary consequence of this arrangement. I was present during the sojourn of Sir Percival Glyde in Cumberland, and was personally concerned in one important result of his short residence under Mr. Fairlie's roof. It is my duty, therefore, to add these new links to the chain of events, and to take up the chain itself at the point where, for the present only Mr. Hartright has dropped it.

I arrived at Limmeridge House on Friday the second of November.

My object was to remain at Mr. Fairlie's until the arrival of Sir Percival Glyde. If that event led to the appointment of any given day for Sir Percival's union with Miss Fairlie, I was to take the necessary instructions back with me to London, and to occupy myself in drawing the lady's marriage-settlement.

On the Friday I was not favoured by Mr. Fairlie with an interview. He had been, or had fancied himself to be, an invalid for years past, and he was not well enough to receive me. Miss Halcombe was the first member of the

family whom I saw. She met me at the house door, and introduced me to Mr. Hartright, who had been staying at Limmeridge for some time past.

I did not see Miss Fairlie until later in the day, at dinner-time. She was not looking well, and I was sorry to observe it. She is a sweet lovable girl, as amiable and attentive to every one about her as her excellent mother used to be--though, personally speaking, she takes after her father. Mrs. Fairlie had dark eyes and hair, and her elder daughter, Miss Halcombe, strongly reminds me of her. Miss Fairlie played to us in the evening--not so well as usual, I thought. We had a rubber at whist, a mere profanation, so far as play was concerned, of that noble game. I had been favourably impressed by Mr. Hartright on our first introduction to one another, but I soon discovered that he was not free from the social failings incidental to his age. There are three things that none of the young men of the present generation can do. They can't sit over their wine, they can't play at whist, and they can't pay a lady a compliment. Mr. Hartright was no exception to the general rule. Otherwise, even in those early days and on that short acquaintance, he struck me as being a modest and gentlemanlike young man.

So the Friday passed. I say nothing about the more serious matters which engaged my attention on that day--the anonymous letter to Miss Fairlie, the measures I thought it right to adopt when the matter was mentioned to me, and the conviction I entertained that every possible explanation of the circumstances would be readily afforded by Sir Percival Glyde, having all been fully noticed, as I understand, in the narrative which precedes this.

On the Saturday Mr. Hartright had left before I got down to breakfast. Miss Fairlie kept her room all day, and Miss Halcombe appeared to me to be out of spirits. The house was not what it used to be in the time of Mr. and Mrs. Philip Fairlie. I took a walk by myself in the forenoon, and looked about at some of the places which I first saw when I was staying at Limmeridge to transact family business, more than thirty years since. They were not what they used to be either.

At two o'clock Mr. Fairlie sent to say he was well enough to see me. HE had not altered, at any rate, since I first knew him. His talk was to the same purpose as usual--all about himself and his ailments, his wonderful coins, and his matchless Rembrandt etchings. The moment I tried to speak of the business that had brought me to his house, he shut his eyes and said I "upset" him. I persisted in upsetting him by returning again and again to the subject. All I could ascertain was that he looked on his niece's marriage as a settled thing, that her father had sanctioned it, that he sanctioned it

himself, that it was a desirable marriage, and that he should be personally rejoiced when the worry of it was over. As to the settlements, if I would consult his niece, and afterwards dive as deeply as I pleased into my own knowledge of the family affairs, and get everything ready, and limit his share in the business, as guardian, to saying Yes, at the right moment--why, of course he would meet my views, and everybody else's views, with infinite pleasure. In the meantime, there I saw him, a helpless sufferer, confined to his room. Did I think he looked as if he wanted teasing? No. Then why tease him?

I might, perhaps, have been a little astonished at this extraordinary absence of all self-assertion on Mr. Fairlie's part, in the character of guardian, if my knowledge of the family affairs had not been sufficient to remind me that he was a single man, and that he had nothing more than a life-interest in the Limmeridge property. As matters stood, therefore, I was neither surprised nor disappointed at the result of the interview. Mr. Fairlie had simply justified my expectations--and there was an end of it.

Sunday was a dull day, out of doors and in. A letter arrived for me from Sir Percival Glyde's solicitor, acknowledging the receipt of my copy of the anonymous letter and my accompanying statement of the case. Miss Fairlie joined us in the afternoon, looking pale and depressed, and altogether unlike herself. I had some talk with her, and ventured on a delicate allusion to Sir Percival. She listened and said nothing. All other subjects she pursued willingly, but this subject she allowed to drop. I began to doubt whether she might not be repenting of her engagement--just as young ladies often do, when repentance comes too late.

On Monday Sir Percival Glyde arrived.

I found him to be a most prepossessing man, so far as manners and appearance were concerned. He looked rather older than I had expected, his head being bald over the forehead, and his face somewhat marked and worn, but his movements were as active and his spirits as high as a young man's. His meeting with Miss Halcombe was delightfully hearty and unaffected, and his reception of me, upon my being presented to him, was so easy and pleasant that we got on together like old friends. Miss Fairlie was not with us when he arrived, but she entered the room about ten minutes afterwards. Sir Percival rose and paid his compliments with perfect grace. His evident concern on seeing the change for the worse in the young lady's looks was expressed with a mixture of tenderness and respect, with an unassuming delicacy of tone, voice, and manner, which did equal credit to his good breeding and his good sense. I was rather surprised, under

these circumstances, to see that Miss Fairlie continued to be constrained and uneasy in his presence, and that she took the first opportunity of leaving the room again. Sir Percival neither noticed the restraint in her reception of him, nor her sudden withdrawal from our society. He had not obtruded his attentions on her while she was present, and he did not embarrass Miss Halcombe by any allusion to her departure when she was gone. His tact and taste were never at fault on this or on any other occasion while I was in his company at Limmeridge House.

As soon as Miss Fairlie had left the room he spared us all embarrassment on the subject of the anonymous letter, by adverting to it of his own accord. He had stopped in London on his way from Hampshire, had seen his solicitor, had read the documents forwarded by me, and had travelled on to Cumberland, anxious to satisfy our minds by the speediest and the fullest explanation that words could convey. On hearing him express himself to this effect, I offered him the original letter, which I had kept for his inspection. He thanked me, and declined to look at it, saying that he had seen the copy, and that he was quite willing to leave the original in our hands.

The statement itself, on which he immediately entered, was as simple and satisfactory as I had all along anticipated it would be.

Mrs. Catherick, he informed us, had in past years laid him under some obligations for faithful services rendered to his family connections and to himself. She had been doubly unfortunate in being married to a husband who had deserted her, and in having an only child whose mental faculties had been in a disturbed condition from a very early age. Although her marriage had removed her to a part of Hampshire far distant from the neighbourhood in which Sir Percival's property was situated, he had taken care not to lose sight of her--his friendly feeling towards the poor woman, in consideration of her past services, having been greatly strengthened by his admiration of the patience and courage with which she supported her calamities. In course of time the symptoms of mental affliction in her unhappy daughter increased to such a serious extent, as to make it a matter of necessity to place her under proper medical care. Mrs. Catherick herself recognised this necessity, but she also felt the prejudice common to persons occupying her respectable station, against allowing her child to be admitted, as a pauper, into a public Asylum. Sir Percival had respected this prejudice, as he respected honest independence of feeling in any rank of life, and had resolved to mark his grateful sense of Mrs. Catherick's early attachment to the interests of himself and his family, by defraying the expense of her daughter's maintenance in a trustworthy private Asylum. To her mother's

regret, and to his own regret, the unfortunate creature had discovered the share which circumstances had induced him to take in placing her under restraint, and had conceived the most intense hatred and distrust of him in consequence. To that hatred and distrust--which had expressed itself in various ways in the Asylum--the anonymous letter, written after her escape, was plainly attributable. If Miss Halcombe's or Mr. Gilmore's recollection of the document did not confirm that view, or if they wished for any additional particulars about the Asylum (the address of which he mentioned, as well as the names and addresses of the two doctors on whose certificates the patient was admitted), he was ready to answer any question and to clear up any uncertainty. He had done his duty to the unhappy young woman, by instructing his solicitor to spare no expense in tracing her, and in restoring her once more to medical care, and he was now only anxious to do his duty towards Miss Fairlie and towards her family, in the same plain, straightforward way.

I was the first to speak in answer to this appeal. My own course was plain to me. It is the great beauty of the Law that it can dispute any human statement, made under any circumstances, and reduced to any form. If I had felt professionally called upon to set up a case against Sir Percival Glyde, on the strength of his own explanation, I could have done so beyond all doubt. But my duty did not lie in this direction--my function was of the purely judicial kind. I was to weigh the explanation we had just heard, to allow all due force to the high reputation of the gentleman who offered it, and to decide honestly whether the probabilities, on Sir Percival's own showing, were plainly with him, or plainly against him. My own conviction was that they were plainly with him, and I accordingly declared that his explanation was, to my mind, unquestionably a satisfactory one.

Miss Halcombe, after looking at me very earnestly, said a few words, on her side, to the same effect--with a certain hesitation of manner, however, which the circumstances did not seem to me to warrant. I am unable to say, positively, whether Sir Percival noticed this or not. My opinion is that he did, seeing that he pointedly resumed the subject, although he might now, with all propriety, have allowed it to drop.

"If my plain statement of facts had only been addressed to Mr. Gilmore," he said, "I should consider any further reference to this unhappy matter as unnecessary. I may fairly expect Mr. Gilmore, as a gentleman, to believe me on my word, and when he has done me that justice, all discussion of the subject between us has come to an end. But my position with a lady is not the same. I owe to her--what I would concede to no man alive--a PROOF of the truth of my assertion. You cannot ask for that proof, Miss Halcombe,

and it is therefore my duty to you, and still more to Miss Fairlie, to offer it. May I beg that you will write at once to the mother of this unfortunate woman--to Mrs. Catherick--to ask for her testimony in support of the explanation which I have just offered to you."

I saw Miss Halcombe change colour, and look a little uneasy. Sir Percival's suggestion, politely as it was expressed, appeared to her, as it appeared to me, to point very delicately at the hesitation which her manner had betrayed a moment or two since.

"I hope, Sir Percival, you don't do me the injustice to suppose that I distrust you," she said quickly.

"Certainly not, Miss Halcombe. I make my proposal purely as an act of attention to YOU. Will you excuse my obstinacy if I still venture to press it?"

He walked to the writing-table as he spoke, drew a chair to it, and opened the paper case.

"Let me beg you to write the note," he said, "as a favour to ME. It need not occupy you more than a few minutes. You have only to ask Mrs. Catherick two questions. First, if her daughter was placed in the Asylum with her knowledge and approval. Secondly, if the share I took in the matter was such as to merit the expression of her gratitude towards myself? Mr. Gilmore's mind is at ease on this unpleasant subject, and your mind is at ease--pray set my mind at ease also by writing the note."

"You oblige me to grant your request, Sir Percival, when I would much rather refuse it."

With those words Miss Halcombe rose from her place and went to the writing-table. Sir Percival thanked her, handed her a pen, and then walked away towards the fireplace. Miss Fairlie's little Italian greyhound was lying on the rug. He held out his hand, and called to the dog good-humouredly.

"Come, Nina," he said, "we remember each other, don't we?"

The little beast, cowardly and cross-grained, as pet-dogs usually are, looked up at him sharply, shrank away from his outstretched hand, whined, shivered, and hid itself under a sofa. It was scarcely possible that he could have been put out by such a trifle as a dog's reception of him, but I observed, nevertheless, that he walked away towards the window very suddenly. Perhaps his temper is irritable at times. If so, I can sympathise

with him. My temper is irritable at times too.

Miss Halcombe was not long in writing the note. When it was done she rose from the writing-table, and handed the open sheet of paper to Sir Percival. He bowed, took it from her, folded it up immediately without looking at the contents, sealed it, wrote the address, and handed it back to her in silence. I never saw anything more gracefully and more becomingly done in my life.

"You insist on my posting this letter, Sir Percival?" said Miss Halcombe.

"I beg you will post it," he answered. "And now that it is written and sealed up, allow me to ask one or two last questions about the unhappy woman to whom it refers. I have read the communication which Mr. Gilmore kindly addressed to my solicitor, describing the circumstances under which the writer of the anonymous letter was identified. But there are certain points to which that statement does not refer. Did Anne Catherick see Miss Fairlie?"

"Certainly not," replied Miss Halcombe.

"Did she see you?"

"No."

"She saw nobody from the house then, except a certain Mr. Hartright, who accidentally met with her in the churchyard here?"

"Nobody else."

"Mr. Hartright was employed at Limmeridge as a drawing-master, I believe? Is he a member of one of the Water-Colour Societies?"

"I believe he is," answered Miss Halcombe.

He paused for a moment, as if he was thinking over the last answer, and then added--

"Did you find out where Anne Catherick was living, when she was in this neighbourhood?"

"Yes. At a farm on the moor, called Todd's Corner."

"It is a duty we all owe to the poor creature herself to trace her," continued

Sir Percival. "She may have said something at Todd's Corner which may help us to find her. I will go there and make inquiries on the chance. In the meantime, as I cannot prevail on myself to discuss this painful subject with Miss Fairlie, may I beg, Miss Halcombe, that you will kindly undertake to give her the necessary explanation, deferring it of course until you have received the reply to that note."

Miss Halcombe promised to comply with his request. He thanked her, nodded pleasantly, and left us, to go and establish himself in his own room. As he opened the door the cross-grained greyhound poked out her sharp muzzle from under the sofa, and barked and snapped at him.

"A good morning's work, Miss Halcombe," I said, as soon as we were alone. "Here is an anxious day well ended already."

"Yes," she answered; "no doubt. I am very glad your mind is satisfied."

"My mind! Surely, with that note in your hand, your mind is at ease too?"

"Oh yes--how can it be otherwise? I know the thing could not be," she went on, speaking more to herself than to me; "but I almost wish Walter Hartright had stayed here long enough to be present at the explanation, and to hear the proposal to me to write this note."

I was a little surprised--perhaps a little piqued also--by these last words.

"Events, it is true, connected Mr. Hartright very remarkably with the affair of the letter," I said; "and I readily admit that he conducted himself, all things considered, with great delicacy and discretion. But I am quite at a loss to understand what useful influence his presence could have exercised in relation to the effect of Sir Percival's statement on your mind or mine."

"It was only a fancy," she said absently. "There is no need to discuss it, Mr. Gilmore. Your experience ought to be, and is, the best guide I can desire."

I did not altogether like her thrusting the whole responsibility, in this marked manner, on my shoulders. If Mr. Fairlie had done it, I should not have been surprised. But resolute, clear-minded Miss Halcombe was the very last person in the world whom I should have expected to find shrinking from the expression of an opinion of her own.

"If any doubts still trouble you," I said, "why not mention them to me at once? Tell me plainly, have you any reason to distrust Sir Percival Glyde?"

"None whatever."

"Do you see anything improbable, or contradictory, in his explanation?"

"How can I say I do, after the proof he has offered me of the truth of it? Can there be better testimony in his favour, Mr. Gilmore, than the testimony of the woman's mother?"

"None better. If the answer to your note of inquiry proves to be satisfactory, I for one cannot see what more any friend of Sir Percival's can possibly expect from him."

"Then we will post the note," she said, rising to leave the room, "and dismiss all further reference to the subject until the answer arrives. Don't attach any weight to my hesitation. I can give no better reason for it than that I have been over-anxious about Laura lately--and anxiety, Mr. Gilmore, unsettles the strongest of us."

She left me abruptly, her naturally firm voice faltering as she spoke those last words. A sensitive, vehement, passionate nature--a woman of ten thousand in these trivial, superficial times. I had known her from her earliest years--I had seen her tested, as she grew up, in more than one trying family crisis, and my long experience made me attach an importance to her hesitation under the circumstances here detailed, which I should certainly not have felt in the case of another woman. I could see no cause for any uneasiness or any doubt, but she had made me a little uneasy, and a little doubtful, nevertheless. In my youth, I should have chafed and fretted under the irritation of my own unreasonable state of mind. In my age, I knew better, and went out philosophically to walk it off.

II

We all met again at dinner-time.

Sir Percival was in such boisterous high spirits that I hardly recognised him as the same man whose quiet tact, refinement, and good sense had impressed me so strongly at the interview of the morning. The only trace of his former self that I could detect reappeared, every now and then, in his manner towards Miss Fairlie. A look or a word from her suspended his loudest laugh, checked his gayest flow of talk, and rendered him all attention to her, and to no one else at table, in an instant. Although he never openly tried to draw her into the conversation, he never lost the slightest chance she gave him of letting her drift into it by accident, and of saying the words to her, under those favourable circumstances, which a man with less tact and delicacy would have pointedly addressed to her the moment they occurred to him. Rather to my surprise, Miss Fairlie appeared to be sensible of his attentions without being moved by them. She was a little confused from time to time when he looked at her, or spoke to her; but she never warmed towards him. Rank, fortune, good breeding, good looks, the respect of a gentleman, and the devotion of a lover were all humbly placed at her feet, and, so far as appearances went, were all offered in vain.

On the next day, the Tuesday, Sir Percival went in the morning (taking one of the servants with him as a guide) to Todd's Corner. His inquiries, as I afterwards heard, led to no results. On his return he had an interview with Mr. Fairlie, and in the afternoon he and Miss Halcombe rode out together. Nothing else happened worthy of record. The evening passed as usual. There was no change in Sir Percival, and no change in Miss Fairlie.

The Wednesday's post brought with it an event--the reply from Mrs. Catherick. I took a copy of the document, which I have preserved, and which I may as well present in this place. It ran as follows--

"MADAM,--I beg to acknowledge the receipt of your letter, inquiring whether my daughter, Anne, was placed under medical superintendence with my knowledge and approval, and whether the share taken in the matter by Sir Percival Glyde was such as to merit the expression of my gratitude towards that gentleman. Be pleased to accept my answer in the affirmative to both those questions, and believe me to remain, your obedient servant,

"JANE ANNE CATHERICK."

Short, sharp, and to the point; in form rather a business-like letter for a woman to write--in substance as plain a confirmation as could be desired of Sir Percival Glyde's statement. This was my opinion, and with certain minor reservations, Miss Halcombe's opinion also. Sir Percival, when the letter was shown to him, did not appear to be struck by the sharp, short tone of it. He told us that Mrs. Catherick was a woman of few words, a clear-headed, straightforward, unimaginative person, who wrote briefly and plainly, just as she spoke.

The next duty to be accomplished, now that the answer had been received, was to acquaint Miss Fairlie with Sir Percival's explanation. Miss Halcombe had undertaken to do this, and had left the room to go to her sister, when she suddenly returned again, and sat down by the easy-chair in which I was reading the newspaper. Sir Percival had gone out a minute before to look at the stables, and no one was in the room but ourselves.

"I suppose we have really and truly done all we can?" she said, turning and twisting Mrs. Catherick's letter in her hand.

"If we are friends of Sir Percival's, who know him and trust him, we have done all, and more than all, that is necessary," I answered, a little annoyed by this return of her hesitation. "But if we are enemies who suspect him----"

"That alternative is not even to be thought of," she interposed. "We are Sir Percival's friends, and if generosity and forbearance can add to our regard for him, we ought to be Sir Percival's admirers as well. You know that he saw Mr. Fairlie yesterday, and that he afterwards went out with me."

"Yes. I saw you riding away together."

"We began the ride by talking about Anne Catherick, and about the singular manner in which Mr. Hartright met with her. But we soon dropped that subject, and Sir Percival spoke next, in the most unselfish terms, of his engagement with Laura. He said he had observed that she was out of spirits, and he was willing, if not informed to the contrary, to attribute to that cause the alteration in her manner towards him during his present visit. If, however, there was any more serious reason for the change, he would entreat that no constraint might be placed on her inclinations either by Mr. Fairlie or by me. All he asked, in that case, was that she would recall to mind, for the last time, what the circumstances were under which the

engagement between them was made, and what his conduct had been from the beginning of the courtship to the present time. If, after due reflection on those two subjects, she seriously desired that he should withdraw his pretensions to the honour of becoming her husband--and if she would tell him so plainly with her own lips--he would sacrifice himself by leaving her perfectly free to withdraw from the engagement."

"No man could say more than that, Miss Halcombe. As to my experience, few men in his situation would have said as much."

She paused after I had spoken those words, and looked at me with a singular expression of perplexity and distress.

"I accuse nobody, and I suspect nothing," she broke out abruptly. "But I cannot and will not accept the responsibility of persuading Laura to this marriage."

"That is exactly the course which Sir Percival Glyde has himself requested you to take," I replied in astonishment. "He has begged you not to force her inclinations."

"And he indirectly obliges me to force them, if I give her his message."

"How can that possibly be?"

"Consult your own knowledge of Laura, Mr. Gilmore. If I tell her to reflect on the circumstances of her engagement, I at once appeal to two of the strongest feelings in her nature--to her love for her father's memory, and to her strict regard for truth. You know that she never broke a promise in her life--you know that she entered on this engagement at the beginning of her father's fatal illness, and that he spoke hopefully and happily of her marriage to Sir Percival Glyde on his deathbed."

I own that I was a little shocked at this view of the case.

"Surely," I said, "you don't mean to infer that when Sir Percival spoke to you yesterday he speculated on such a result as you have just mentioned?"

Her frank, fearless face answered for her before she spoke.

"Do you think I would remain an instant in the company of any man whom I suspected of such baseness as that?" she asked angrily.

I liked to feel her hearty indignation flash out on me in that way. We see so much malice and so little indignation in my profession.

"In that case," I said, "excuse me if I tell you, in our legal phrase, that you are travelling out of the record. Whatever the consequences may be, Sir Percival has a right to expect that your sister should carefully consider her engagement from every reasonable point of view before she claims her release from it. If that unlucky letter has prejudiced her against him, go at once, and tell her that he has cleared himself in your eyes and in mine. What objection can she urge against him after that? What excuse can she possibly have for changing her mind about a man whom she had virtually accepted for her husband more than two years ago?"

"In the eyes of law and reason, Mr. Gilmore, no excuse, I daresay. If she still hesitates, and if I still hesitate, you must attribute our strange conduct, if you like, to caprice in both cases, and we must bear the imputation as well as we can."

With those words she suddenly rose and left me. When a sensible woman has a serious question put to her, and evades it by a flippant answer, it is a sure sign, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, that she has something to conceal. I returned to the perusal of the newspaper, strongly suspecting that Miss Halcombe and Miss Fairlie had a secret between them which they were keeping from Sir Percival, and keeping from me. I thought this hard on both of us, especially on Sir Percival.

My doubts--or to speak more correctly, my convictions--were confirmed by Miss Halcombe's language and manner when I saw her again later in the day. She was suspiciously brief and reserved in telling me the result of her interview with her sister. Miss Fairlie, it appeared, had listened quietly while the affair of the letter was placed before her in the right point of view, but when Miss Halcombe next proceeded to say that the object of Sir Percival's visit at Limmeridge was to prevail on her to let a day be fixed for the marriage she checked all further reference to the subject by begging for time. If Sir Percival would consent to spare her for the present, she would undertake to give him his final answer before the end of the year. She pleaded for this delay with such anxiety and agitation, that Miss Halcombe had promised to use her influence, if necessary, to obtain it, and there, at Miss Fairlie's earnest entreaty, all further discussion of the marriage question had ended.

The purely temporary arrangement thus proposed might have been convenient enough to the young lady, but it proved somewhat embarrassing

to the writer of these lines. That morning's post had brought a letter from my partner, which obliged me to return to town the next day by the afternoon train. It was extremely probable that I should find no second opportunity of presenting myself at Limmeridge House during the remainder of the year. In that case, supposing Miss Fairlie ultimately decided on holding to her engagement, my necessary personal communication with her, before I drew her settlement, would become something like a downright impossibility, and we should be obliged to commit to writing questions which ought always to be discussed on both sides by word of mouth. I said nothing about this difficulty until Sir Percival had been consulted on the subject of the desired delay. He was too gallant a gentleman not to grant the request immediately. When Miss Halcombe informed me of this I told her that I must absolutely speak to her sister before I left Limmeridge, and it was, therefore, arranged that I should see Miss Fairlie in her own sitting-room the next morning. She did not come down to dinner, or join us in the evening. Indisposition was the excuse, and I thought Sir Percival looked, as well he might, a little annoyed when he heard of it.

The next morning, as soon as breakfast was over, I went up to Miss Fairlie's sitting-room. The poor girl looked so pale and sad, and came forward to welcome me so readily and prettily, that the resolution to lecture her on her caprice and indecision, which I had been forming all the way upstairs, failed me on the spot. I led her back to the chair from which she had risen, and placed myself opposite to her. Her cross-grained pet greyhound was in the room, and I fully expected a barking and snapping reception. Strange to say, the whimsical little brute falsified my expectations by jumping into my lap and poking its sharp muzzle familiarly into my hand the moment I sat down.

"You used often to sit on my knee when you were a child, my dear," I said, "and now your little dog seems determined to succeed you in the vacant throne. Is that pretty drawing your doing?"

I pointed to a little album which lay on the table by her side and which she had evidently been looking over when I came in. The page that lay open had a small water-colour landscape very neatly mounted on it. This was the drawing which had suggested my question--an idle question enough--but how could I begin to talk of business to her the moment I opened my lips?

"No," she said, looking away from the drawing rather confusedly, "it is not my doing."

Her fingers had a restless habit, which I remembered in her as a child, of always playing with the first thing that came to hand whenever any one was

talking to her. On this occasion they wandered to the album, and toyed absently about the margin of the little water-colour drawing. The expression of melancholy deepened on her face. She did not look at the drawing, or look at me. Her eyes moved uneasily from object to object in the room, betraying plainly that she suspected what my purpose was in coming to speak to her. Seeing that, I thought it best to get to the purpose with as little delay as possible.

"One of the errands, my dear, which brings me here is to bid you good-bye," I began. "I must get back to London to-day: and, before I leave, I want to have a word with you on the subject of your own affairs."

"I am very sorry you are going, Mr. Gilmore," she said, looking at me kindly. "It is like the happy old times to have you here."

"I hope I may be able to come back and recall those pleasant memories once more," I continued; "but as there is some uncertainty about the future, I must take my opportunity when I can get it, and speak to you now. I am your old lawyer and your old friend, and I may remind you, I am sure, without offence, of the possibility of your marrying Sir Percival Glyde."

She took her hand off the little album as suddenly as if it had turned hot and burnt her. Her fingers twined together nervously in her lap, her eyes looked down again at the floor, and an expression of constraint settled on her face which looked almost like an expression of pain.

"Is it absolutely necessary to speak of my marriage engagement?" she asked in low tones.

"It is necessary to refer to it," I answered, "but not to dwell on it. Let us merely say that you may marry, or that you may not marry. In the first case, I must be prepared, beforehand, to draw your settlement, and I ought not to do that without, as a matter of politeness, first consulting you. This may be my only chance of hearing what your wishes are. Let us, therefore, suppose the case of your marrying, and let me inform you, in as few words as possible, what your position is now, and what you may make it, if you please, in the future."

I explained to her the object of a marriage-settlement, and then told her exactly what her prospects were--in the first place, on her coming of age, and in the second place, on the decease of her uncle--marking the distinction between the property in which she had a life-interest only, and the property which was left at her own control. She listened attentively,

with the constrained expression still on her face, and her hands still nervously clasped together in her lap.

"And now," I said in conclusion, "tell me if you can think of any condition which, in the case we have supposed, you would wish me to make for you--subject, of course, to your guardian's approval, as you are not yet of age."

She moved uneasily in her chair, then looked in my face on a sudden very earnestly.

"If it does happen," she began faintly, "if I am----"

"If you are married," I added, helping her out.

"Don't let him part me from Marian," she cried, with a sudden outbreak of energy. "Oh, Mr. Gilmore, pray make it law that Marian is to live with me!"

Under other circumstances I might, perhaps, have been amused at this essentially feminine interpretation of my question, and of the long explanation which had preceded it. But her looks and tones, when she spoke, were of a kind to make me more than serious--they distressed me. Her words, few as they were, betrayed a desperate clinging to the past which boded ill for the future.

"Your having Marian Halcombe to live with you can easily be settled by private arrangement," I said. "You hardly understood my question, I think. It referred to your own property--to the disposal of your money. Supposing you were to make a will when you come of age, who would you like the money to go to?"

"Marian has been mother and sister both to me," said the good, affectionate girl, her pretty blue eyes glistening while she spoke. "May I leave it to Marian, Mr. Gilmore?"

"Certainly, my love," I answered. "But remember what a large sum it is. Would you like it all to go to Miss Halcombe?"

She hesitated; her colour came and went, and her hand stole back again to the little album.

"Not all of it," she said. "There is some one else besides Marian----"

She stopped; her colour heightened, and the fingers of the hand that rested

upon the album beat gently on the margin of the drawing, as if her memory had set them going mechanically with the remembrance of a favourite tune.

"You mean some other member of the family besides Miss Halcombe?" I suggested, seeing her at a loss to proceed.

The heightening colour spread to her forehead and her neck, and the nervous fingers suddenly clasped themselves fast round the edge of the book.

"There is some one else," she said, not noticing my last words, though she had evidently heard them; "there is some one else who might like a little keepsake if--if I might leave it. There would be no harm if I should die first--"

She paused again. The colour that had spread over her cheeks suddenly, as suddenly left them. The hand on the album resigned its hold, trembled a little, and moved the book away from her. She looked at me for an instant--then turned her head aside in the chair. Her handkerchief fell to the floor as she changed her position, and she hurriedly hid her face from me in her hands.

Sad! To remember her, as I did, the liveliest, happiest child that ever laughed the day through, and to see her now, in the flower of her age and her beauty, so broken and so brought down as this!

In the distress that she caused me I forgot the years that had passed, and the change they had made in our position towards one another. I moved my chair close to her, and picked up her handkerchief from the carpet, and drew her hands from her face gently. "Don't cry, my love," I said, and dried the tears that were gathering in her eyes with my own hand, as if she had been the little Laura Fairlie of ten long years ago.

It was the best way I could have taken to compose her. She laid her head on my shoulder, and smiled faintly through her tears.

"I am very sorry for forgetting myself," she said artlessly. "I have not been well--I have felt sadly weak and nervous lately, and I often cry without reason when I am alone. I am better now--I can answer you as I ought, Mr. Gilmore, I can indeed."

"No, no, my dear," I replied, "we will consider the subject as done with for the present. You have said enough to sanction my taking the best possible

care of your interests, and we can settle details at another opportunity. Let us have done with business now, and talk of something else."

I led her at once into speaking on other topics. In ten minutes' time she was in better spirits, and I rose to take my leave.

"Come here again," she said earnestly. "I will try to be worthier of your kind feeling for me and for my interests if you will only come again."

Still clinging to the past--that past which I represented to her, in my way, as Miss Halcombe did in hers! It troubled me sorely to see her looking back, at the beginning of her career, just as I look back at the end of mine.

"If I do come again, I hope I shall find you better," I said; "better and happier. God bless you, my dear!"

She only answered by putting up her cheek to me to be kissed. Even lawyers have hearts, and mine ached a little as I took leave of her.

The whole interview between us had hardly lasted more than half an hour--she had not breathed a word, in my presence, to explain the mystery of her evident distress and dismay at the prospect of her marriage, and yet she had contrived to win me over to her side of the question, I neither knew how nor why. I had entered the room, feeling that Sir Percival Glyde had fair reason to complain of the manner in which she was treating him. I left it, secretly hoping that matters might end in her taking him at his word and claiming her release. A man of my age and experience ought to have known better than to vacillate in this unreasonable manner. I can make no excuse for myself; I can only tell the truth, and say--so it was.

The hour for my departure was now drawing near. I sent to Mr. Fairlie to say that I would wait on him to take leave if he liked, but that he must excuse my being rather in a hurry. He sent a message back, written in pencil on a slip of paper: "Kind love and best wishes, dear Gilmore. Hurry of any kind is inexpressibly injurious to me. Pray take care of yourself. Good-bye."

Just before I left I saw Miss Halcombe for a moment alone.

"Have you said all you wanted to Laura?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied. "She is very weak and nervous--I am glad she has you to take care of her."

Miss Halcombe's sharp eyes studied my face attentively.

"You are altering your opinion about Laura," she said. "You are readier to make allowances for her than you were yesterday."

No sensible man ever engages, unprepared, in a fencing match of words with a woman. I only answered--

"Let me know what happens. I will do nothing till I hear from you."

She still looked hard in my face. "I wish it was all over, and well over, Mr. Gilmore--and so do you." With those words she left me.

Sir Percival most politely insisted on seeing me to the carriage door.

"If you are ever in my neighbourhood," he said, "pray don't forget that I am sincerely anxious to improve our acquaintance. The tried and trusted old friend of this family will be always a welcome visitor in any house of mine."

A really irresistible man--courteous, considerate, delightfully free from pride--a gentleman, every inch of him. As I drove away to the station I felt as if I could cheerfully do anything to promote the interests of Sir Percival Glyde--anything in the world, except drawing the marriage settlement of his wife.

III

A week passed, after my return to London, without the receipt of any communication from Miss Halcombe.

On the eighth day a letter in her handwriting was placed among the other letters on my table.

It announced that Sir Percival Glyde had been definitely accepted, and that the marriage was to take place, as he had originally desired, before the end of the year. In all probability the ceremony would be performed during the last fortnight in December. Miss Fairlie's twenty-first birthday was late in March. She would, therefore, by this arrangement, become Sir Percival's wife about three months before she was of age.

I ought not to have been surprised, I ought not to have been sorry, but I was surprised and sorry, nevertheless. Some little disappointment, caused by the unsatisfactory shortness of Miss Halcombe's letter, mingled itself with these feelings, and contributed its share towards upsetting my serenity for the day. In six lines my correspondent announced the proposed marriage--in three more, she told me that Sir Percival had left Cumberland to return to his house in Hampshire, and in two concluding sentences she informed me, first, that Laura was sadly in want of change and cheerful society; secondly, that she had resolved to try the effect of some such change forthwith, by taking her sister away with her on a visit to certain old friends in Yorkshire. There the letter ended, without a word to explain what the circumstances were which had decided Miss Fairlie to accept Sir Percival Glyde in one short week from the time when I had last seen her.

At a later period the cause of this sudden determination was fully explained to me. It is not my business to relate it imperfectly, on hearsay evidence. The circumstances came within the personal experience of Miss Halcombe, and when her narrative succeeds mine, she will describe them in every particular exactly as they happened. In the meantime, the plain duty for me to perform--before I, in my turn, lay down my pen and withdraw from the story--is to relate the one remaining event connected with Miss Fairlie's proposed marriage in which I was concerned, namely, the drawing of the settlement.

It is impossible to refer intelligibly to this document without first entering into certain particulars in relation to the bride's pecuniary affairs. I will try

to make my explanation briefly and plainly, and to keep it free from professional obscurities and technicalities. The matter is of the utmost importance. I warn all readers of these lines that Miss Fairlie's inheritance is a very serious part of Miss Fairlie's story, and that Mr. Gilmore's experience, in this particular, must be their experience also, if they wish to understand the narratives which are yet to come.

Miss Fairlie's expectations, then, were of a twofold kind, comprising her possible inheritance of real property, or land, when her uncle died, and her absolute inheritance of personal property, or money, when she came of age.

Let us take the land first.

In the time of Miss Fairlie's paternal grandfather (whom we will call Mr. Fairlie, the elder) the entailed succession to the Limmeridge estate stood thus--

Mr. Fairlie, the elder, died and left three sons, Philip, Frederick, and Arthur. As eldest son, Philip succeeded to the estate, if he died without leaving a son, the property went to the second brother, Frederick; and if Frederick died also without leaving a son, the property went to the third brother, Arthur.

As events turned out, Mr. Philip Fairlie died leaving an only daughter, the Laura of this story, and the estate, in consequence, went, in course of law, to the second brother, Frederick, a single man. The third brother, Arthur, had died many years before the decease of Philip, leaving a son and a daughter. The son, at the age of eighteen, was drowned at Oxford. His death left Laura, the daughter of Mr. Philip Fairlie, presumptive heiress to the estate, with every chance of succeeding to it, in the ordinary course of nature, on her uncle Frederick's death, if the said Frederick died without leaving male issue.

Except in the event, then, of Mr. Frederick Fairlie's marrying and leaving an heir (the two very last things in the world that he was likely to do), his niece, Laura, would have the property on his death, possessing, it must be remembered, nothing more than a life-interest in it. If she died single, or died childless, the estate would revert to her cousin, Magdalen, the daughter of Mr. Arthur Fairlie. If she married, with a proper settlement--or, in other words, with the settlement I meant to make for her--the income from the estate (a good three thousand a year) would, during her lifetime, be at her own disposal. If she died before her husband, he would naturally expect to be left in the enjoyment of the income, for HIS lifetime. If she had a son,

that son would be the heir, to the exclusion of her cousin Magdalen. Thus, Sir Percival's prospects in marrying Miss Fairlie (so far as his wife's expectations from real property were concerned) promised him these two advantages, on Mr. Frederick Fairlie's death: First, the use of three thousand a year (by his wife's permission, while she lived, and in his own right, on her death, if he survived her); and, secondly, the inheritance of Limmeridge for his son, if he had one.

So much for the landed property, and for the disposal of the income from it, on the occasion of Miss Fairlie's marriage. Thus far, no difficulty or difference of opinion on the lady's settlement was at all likely to arise between Sir Percival's lawyer and myself.

The personal estate, or, in other words, the money to which Miss Fairlie would become entitled on reaching the age of twenty-one years, is the next point to consider.

This part of her inheritance was, in itself, a comfortable little fortune. It was derived under her father's will, and it amounted to the sum of twenty thousand pounds. Besides this, she had a life-interest in ten thousand pounds more, which latter amount was to go, on her decease, to her aunt Eleanor, her father's only sister. It will greatly assist in setting the family affairs before the reader in the clearest possible light, if I stop here for a moment, to explain why the aunt had been kept waiting for her legacy until the death of the niece.

Mr. Philip Fairlie had lived on excellent terms with his sister Eleanor, as long as she remained a single woman. But when her marriage took place, somewhat late in life, and when that marriage united her to an Italian gentleman named Fosco, or, rather, to an Italian nobleman--seeing that he rejoiced in the title of Count--Mr. Fairlie disapproved of her conduct so strongly that he ceased to hold any communication with her, and even went the length of striking her name out of his will. The other members of the family all thought this serious manifestation of resentment at his sister's marriage more or less unreasonable. Count Fosco, though not a rich man, was not a penniless adventurer either. He had a small but sufficient income of his own. He had lived many years in England, and he held an excellent position in society. These recommendations, however, availed nothing with Mr. Fairlie. In many of his opinions he was an Englishman of the old school, and he hated a foreigner simply and solely because he was a foreigner. The utmost that he could be prevailed on to do, in after years--mainly at Miss Fairlie's intercession--was to restore his sister's name to its former place in his will, but to keep her waiting for her legacy by giving the

income of the money to his daughter for life, and the money itself, if her aunt died before her, to her cousin Magdalen. Considering the relative ages of the two ladies, the aunt's chance, in the ordinary course of nature, of receiving the ten thousand pounds, was thus rendered doubtful in the extreme; and Madame Fosco resented her brother's treatment of her as unjustly as usual in such cases, by refusing to see her niece, and declining to believe that Miss Fairlie's intercession had ever been exerted to restore her name to Mr. Fairlie's will.

Such was the history of the ten thousand pounds. Here again no difficulty could arise with Sir Percival's legal adviser. The income would be at the wife's disposal, and the principal would go to her aunt or her cousin on her death.

All preliminary explanations being now cleared out of the way, I come at last to the real knot of the case--to the twenty thousand pounds.

This sum was absolutely Miss Fairlie's own on her completing her twenty-first year, and the whole future disposition of it depended, in the first instance, on the conditions I could obtain for her in her marriage-settlement. The other clauses contained in that document were of a formal kind, and need not be recited here. But the clause relating to the money is too important to be passed over. A few lines will be sufficient to give the necessary abstract of it.

My stipulation in regard to the twenty thousand pounds was simply this: The whole amount was to be settled so as to give the income to the lady for her life--afterwards to Sir Percival for his life--and the principal to the children of the marriage. In default of issue, the principal was to be disposed of as the lady might by her will direct, for which purpose I reserved to her the right of making a will. The effect of these conditions may be thus summed up. If Lady Glyde died without leaving children, her half-sister Miss Halcombe, and any other relatives or friends whom she might be anxious to benefit, would, on her husband's death, divide among them such shares of her money as she desired them to have. If, on the other hand, she died leaving children, then their interest, naturally and necessarily, superseded all other interests whatsoever. This was the clause--and no one who reads it can fail, I think, to agree with me that it meted out equal justice to all parties.

We shall see how my proposals were met on the husband's side.

At the time when Miss Halcombe's letter reached me I was even more busily

occupied than usual. But I contrived to make leisure for the settlement. I had drawn it, and had sent it for approval to Sir Percival's solicitor, in less than a week from the time when Miss Halcombe had informed me of the proposed marriage.

After a lapse of two days the document was returned to me, with notes and remarks of the baronet's lawyer. His objections, in general, proved to be of the most trifling and technical kind, until he came to the clause relating to the twenty thousand pounds. Against this there were double lines drawn in red ink, and the following note was appended to them--

"Not admissible. The PRINCIPAL to go to Sir Percival Glyde, in the event of his surviving Lady Glyde, and there being no issue."

That is to say, not one farthing of the twenty thousand pounds was to go to Miss Halcombe, or to any other relative or friend of Lady Glyde's. The whole sum, if she left no children, was to slip into the pockets of her husband.

The answer I wrote to this audacious proposal was as short and sharp as I could make it. "My dear sir. Miss Fairlie's settlement. I maintain the clause to which you object, exactly as it stands. Yours truly." The rejoinder came back in a quarter of an hour. "My dear sir. Miss Fairlie's settlement. I maintain the red ink to which you object, exactly as it stands. Yours truly." In the detestable slang of the day, we were now both "at a deadlock," and nothing was left for it but to refer to our clients on either side.

As matters stood, my client--Miss Fairlie not having yet completed her twenty-first year--Mr. Frederick Fairlie, was her guardian. I wrote by that day's post, and put the case before him exactly as it stood, not only urging every argument I could think of to induce him to maintain the clause as I had drawn it, but stating to him plainly the mercenary motive which was at the bottom of the opposition to my settlement of the twenty thousand pounds. The knowledge of Sir Percival's affairs which I had necessarily gained when the provisions of the deed on HIS side were submitted in due course to my examination, had but too plainly informed me that the debts on his estate were enormous, and that his income, though nominally a large one, was virtually, for a man in his position, next to nothing. The want of ready money was the practical necessity of Sir Percival's existence, and his lawyer's note on the clause in the settlement was nothing but the frankly selfish expression of it.

Mr. Fairlie's answer reached me by return of post, and proved to be wandering and irrelevant in the extreme. Turned into plain English, it

practically expressed itself to this effect: "Would dear Gilmore be so very obliging as not to worry his friend and client about such a trifle as a remote contingency? Was it likely that a young woman of twenty-one would die before a man of forty five, and die without children? On the other hand, in such a miserable world as this, was it possible to over-estimate the value of peace and quietness? If those two heavenly blessings were offered in exchange for such an earthly trifle as a remote chance of twenty thousand pounds, was it not a fair bargain? Surely, yes. Then why not make it?"

I threw the letter away in disgust. Just as it had fluttered to the ground, there was a knock at my door, and Sir Percival's solicitor, Mr. Merriman, was shown in. There are many varieties of sharp practitioners in this world, but I think the hardest of all to deal with are the men who overreach you under the disguise of inveterate good-humour. A fat, well fed, smiling, friendly man of business is of all parties to a bargain the most hopeless to deal with. Mr. Merriman was one of this class.

"And how is good Mr. Gilmore?" he began, all in a glow with the warmth of his own amiability. "Glad to see you, sir, in such excellent health. I was passing your door, and I thought I would look in in case you might have something to say to me. Do--now pray do let us settle this little difference of ours by word of mouth, if we can! Have you heard from your client yet?"

"Yes. Have you heard from yours?"

"My dear, good sir! I wish I had heard from him to any purpose--I wish, with all my heart, the responsibility was off my shoulders; but he is obstinate--or let me rather say, resolute--and he won't take it off. 'Merriman, I leave details to you. Do what you think right for my interests, and consider me as having personally withdrawn from the business until it is all over.' Those were Sir Percival's words a fortnight ago, and all I can get him to do now is to repeat them. I am not a hard man, Mr. Gilmore, as you know. Personally and privately, I do assure you, I should like to sponge out that note of mine at this very moment. But if Sir Percival won't go into the matter, if Sir Percival will blindly leave all his interests in my sole care, what course can I possibly take except the course of asserting them? My hands are bound--don't you see, my dear sir?--my hands are bound."

"You maintain your note on the clause, then, to the letter?" I said.

"Yes--deuce take it! I have no other alternative." He walked to the fireplace and warmed himself, humming the fag end of a tune in a rich convivial bass voice. "What does your side say?" he went on; "now pray tell me--what does

your side say?"

I was ashamed to tell him. I attempted to gain time--nay, I did worse. My legal instincts got the better of me, and I even tried to bargain.

"Twenty thousand pounds is rather a large sum to be given up by the lady's friends at two days' notice," I said.

"Very true," replied Mr. Merriman, looking down thoughtfully at his boots. "Properly put, sir--most properly put!"

"A compromise, recognising the interests of the lady's family as well as the interests of the husband, might not perhaps have frightened my client quite so much," I went on. "Come, come! this contingency resolves itself into a matter of bargaining after all. What is the least you will take?"

"The least we will take," said Mr. Merriman, "is nineteen- thousand-nine- hundred-and-ninety-nine-pounds-nineteen-shillings- and-elevenpence- three-farthings. Ha! ha! ha! Excuse me, Mr. Gilmore. I must have my little joke."

"Little enough," I remarked. "The joke is just worth the odd farthing it was made for."

Mr. Merriman was delighted. He laughed over my retort till the room rang again. I was not half so good-humoured on my side; I came back to business, and closed the interview.

"This is Friday," I said. "Give us till Tuesday next for our final answer."

"By all means," replied Mr. Merriman. "Longer, my dear sir, if you like." He took up his hat to go, and then addressed me again. "By the way," he said, "your clients in Cumberland have not heard anything more of the woman who wrote the anonymous letter, have they?"

"Nothing more," I answered. "Have you found no trace of her?"

"Not yet," said my legal friend. "But we don't despair. Sir Percival has his suspicions that Somebody is keeping her in hiding, and we are having that Somebody watched."

"You mean the old woman who was with her in Cumberland," I said.

"Quite another party, sir," answered Mr. Merriman. "We don't happen to have laid hands on the old woman yet. Our Somebody is a man. We have got him close under our eye here in London, and we strongly suspect he had something to do with helping her in the first instance to escape from the Asylum. Sir Percival wanted to question him at once, but I said, 'No. Questioning him will only put him on his guard--watch him, and wait.' We shall see what happens. A dangerous woman to be at large, Mr. Gilmore; nobody knows what she may do next. I wish you good-morning, sir. On Tuesday next I shall hope for the pleasure of hearing from you." He smiled amiably and went out.

My mind had been rather absent during the latter part of the conversation with my legal friend. I was so anxious about the matter of the settlement that I had little attention to give to any other subject, and the moment I was left alone again I began to think over what my next proceeding ought to be.

In the case of any other client I should have acted on my instructions, however personally distasteful to me, and have given up the point about the twenty thousand pounds on the spot. But I could not act with this business-like indifference towards Miss Fairlie. I had an honest feeling of affection and admiration for her--I remembered gratefully that her father had been the kindest patron and friend to me that ever man had--I had felt towards her while I was drawing the settlement as I might have felt, if I had not been an old bachelor, towards a daughter of my own, and I was determined to spare no personal sacrifice in her service and where her interests were concerned. Writing a second time to Mr. Fairlie was not to be thought of--it would only be giving him a second opportunity of slipping through my fingers. Seeing him and personally remonstrating with him might possibly be of more use. The next day was Saturday. I determined to take a return ticket and jolt my old bones down to Cumberland, on the chance of persuading him to adopt the just, the independent, and the honourable course. It was a poor chance enough, no doubt, but when I had tried it my conscience would be at ease. I should then have done all that a man in my position could do to serve the interests of my old friend's only child.

The weather on Saturday was beautiful, a west wind and a bright sun. Having felt latterly a return of that fulness and oppression of the head, against which my doctor warned me so seriously more than two years since, I resolved to take the opportunity of getting a little extra exercise by sending my bag on before me and walking to the terminus in Euston Square. As I came out into Holborn a gentleman walking by rapidly stopped and spoke to me. It was Mr. Walter Hartright.

If he had not been the first to greet me I should certainly have passed him. He was so changed that I hardly knew him again. His face looked pale and haggard--his manner was hurried and uncertain--and his dress, which I remembered as neat and gentlemanlike when I saw him at Limmeridge, was so slovenly now that I should really have been ashamed of the appearance of it on one of my own clerks.

"Have you been long back from Cumberland?" he asked. "I heard from Miss Halcombe lately. I am aware that Sir Percival Glyde's explanation has been considered satisfactory. Will the marriage take place soon? Do you happen to know Mr. Gilmore?"

He spoke so fast, and crowded his questions together so strangely and confusedly, that I could hardly follow him. However accidentally intimate he might have been with the family at Limmeridge, I could not see that he had any right to expect information on their private affairs, and I determined to drop him, as easily as might be, on the subject of Miss Fairlie's marriage.

"Time will show, Mr. Hartright," I said--"time will show. I dare say if we look out for the marriage in the papers we shall not be far wrong. Excuse my noticing it, but I am sorry to see you not looking so well as you were when we last met."

A momentary nervous contraction quivered about his lips and eyes, and made me half reproach myself for having answered him in such a significantly guarded manner.

"I had no right to ask about her marriage," he said bitterly. "I must wait to see it in the newspapers like other people. Yes,"--he went on before I could make any apologies--"I have not been well lately. I am going to another country to try a change of scene and occupation. Miss Halcombe has kindly assisted me with her influence, and my testimonials have been found satisfactory. It is a long distance off, but I don't care where I go, what the climate is, or how long I am away." He looked about him while he said this at the throng of strangers passing us by on either side, in a strange, suspicious manner, as if he thought that some of them might be watching us.

"I wish you well through it, and safe back again," I said, and then added, so as not to keep him altogether at arm's length on the subject of the Fairlies, "I am going down to Limmeridge to-day on business. Miss Halcombe and Miss Fairlie are away just now on a visit to some friends in Yorkshire."

His eyes brightened, and he seemed about to say something in answer, but the same momentary nervous spasm crossed his face again. He took my hand, pressed it hard, and disappeared among the crowd without saying another word. Though he was little more than a stranger to me, I waited for a moment, looking after him almost with a feeling of regret. I had gained in my profession sufficient experience of young men to know what the outward signs and tokens were of their beginning to go wrong, and when I resumed my walk to the railway I am sorry to say I felt more than doubtful about Mr. Hartright's future.

IV

Leaving by an early train, I got to Limmeridge in time for dinner. The house was oppressively empty and dull. I had expected that good Mrs. Vesey would have been company for me in the absence of the young ladies, but she was confined to her room by a cold. The servants were so surprised at seeing me that they hurried and bustled absurdly, and made all sorts of annoying mistakes. Even the butler, who was old enough to have known better, brought me a bottle of port that was chilled. The reports of Mr. Fairlie's health were just as usual, and when I sent up a message to announce my arrival, I was told that he would be delighted to see me the next morning but that the sudden news of my appearance had prostrated him with palpitations for the rest of the evening. The wind howled dismally all night, and strange cracking and groaning noises sounded here, there, and everywhere in the empty house. I slept as wretchedly as possible, and got up in a mighty bad humour to breakfast by myself the next morning.

At ten o'clock I was conducted to Mr. Fairlie's apartments. He was in his usual room, his usual chair, and his usual aggravating state of mind and body. When I went in, his valet was standing before him, holding up for inspection a heavy volume of etchings, as long and as broad as my office writing-desk. The miserable foreigner grinned in the most abject manner, and looked ready to drop with fatigue, while his master composedly turned over the etchings, and brought their hidden beauties to light with the help of a magnifying glass.

"You very best of good old friends," said Mr. Fairlie, leaning back lazily before he could look at me, "are you QUITE well? How nice of you to come here and see me in my solitude. Dear Gilmore!"

I had expected that the valet would be dismissed when I appeared, but nothing of the sort happened. There he stood, in front of his master's chair, trembling under the weight of the etchings, and there Mr. Fairlie sat, serenely twirling the magnifying glass between his white fingers and thumbs.

"I have come to speak to you on a very important matter," I said, "and you will therefore excuse me, if I suggest that we had better be alone."

The unfortunate valet looked at me gratefully. Mr. Fairlie faintly repeated my last three words, "better be alone," with every appearance of the utmost

possible astonishment.

I was in no humour for trifling, and I resolved to make him understand what I meant.

"Oblige me by giving that man permission to withdraw," I said, pointing to the valet.

Mr. Fairlie arched his eyebrows and pursed up his lips in sarcastic surprise.

"Man?" he repeated. "You provoking old Gilmore, what can you possibly mean by calling him a man? He's nothing of the sort. He might have been a man half an hour ago, before I wanted my etchings, and he may be a man half an hour hence, when I don't want them any longer. At present he is simply a portfolio stand. Why object, Gilmore, to a portfolio stand?"

"I DO object. For the third time, Mr. Fairlie, I beg that we may be alone."

My tone and manner left him no alternative but to comply with my request. He looked at the servant, and pointed peevishly to a chair at his side.

"Put down the etchings and go away," he said. "Don't upset me by losing my place. Have you, or have you not, lost my place? Are you sure you have not? And have you put my hand-bell quite within my reach? Yes? Then why the devil don't you go?"

The valet went out. Mr. Fairlie twisted himself round in his chair, polished the magnifying glass with his delicate cambric handkerchief, and indulged himself with a sidelong inspection of the open volume of etchings. It was not easy to keep my temper under these circumstances, but I did keep it.

"I have come here at great personal inconvenience," I said, "to serve the interests of your niece and your family, and I think I have established some slight claim to be favoured with your attention in return."

"Don't bully me!" exclaimed Mr. Fairlie, falling back helplessly in the chair, and closing his eyes. "Please don't bully me. I'm not strong enough."

I was determined not to let him provoke me, for Laura Fairlie's sake.

"My object," I went on, "is to entreat you to reconsider your letter, and not to force me to abandon the just rights of your niece, and of all who belong to her. Let me state the case to you once more, and for the last time."

Mr. Fairlie shook his head and sighed piteously.

"This is heartless of you, Gilmore--very heartless," he said. "Never mind, go on."

I put all the points to him carefully--I set the matter before him in every conceivable light. He lay back in the chair the whole time I was speaking with his eyes closed. When I had done he opened them indolently, took his silver smelling-bottle from the table, and sniffed at it with an air of gentle relish.

"Good Gilmore!" he said between the sniffs, "how very nice this is of you! How you reconcile one to human nature!"

"Give me a plain answer to a plain question, Mr. Fairlie. I tell you again, Sir Percival Glyde has no shadow of a claim to expect more than the income of the money. The money itself if your niece has no children, ought to be under her control, and to return to her family. If you stand firm, Sir Percival must give way--he must give way, I tell you, or he exposes himself to the base imputation of marrying Miss Fairlie entirely from mercenary motives."

Mr. Fairlie shook the silver smelling-bottle at me playfully.

"You dear old Gilmore, how you do hate rank and family, don't you? How you detest Glyde because he happens to be a baronet. What a Radical you are--oh, dear me, what a Radical you are!"

A Radical!!! I could put up with a good deal of provocation, but, after holding the soundest Conservative principles all my life, I could NOT put up with being called a Radical. My blood boiled at it--I started out of my chair--I was speechless with Indignation.

"Don't shake the room!" cried Mr. Fairlie--"for Heaven's sake don't shake the room! Worthiest of all possible Gilmores, I meant no offence. My own views are so extremely liberal that I think I am a Radical myself. Yes. We are a pair of Radicals. Please don't be angry. I can't quarrel--I haven't stamina enough. Shall we drop the subject? Yes. Come and look at these sweet etchings. Do let me teach you to understand the heavenly pearliness of these lines. Do now, there's a good Gilmore!"

While he was maundering on in this way I was, fortunately for my own self-respect, returning to my senses. When I spoke again I was composed

enough to treat his impertinence with the silent contempt that it deserved.

"You are entirely wrong, sir," I said, "in supposing that I speak from any prejudice against Sir Percival Glyde. I may regret that he has so unreservedly resigned himself in this matter to his lawyer's direction as to make any appeal to himself impossible, but I am not prejudiced against him. What I have said would equally apply to any other man in his situation, high or low. The principle I maintain is a recognised principle. If you were to apply at the nearest town here, to the first respectable solicitor you could find, he would tell you as a stranger what I tell you as a friend. He would inform you that it is against all rule to abandon the lady's money entirely to the man she marries. He would decline, on grounds of common legal caution, to give the husband, under any circumstances whatever, an interest of twenty thousand pounds in his wife's death."

"Would he really, Gilmore?" said Mr. Fairlie. "If he said anything half so horrid, I do assure you I should tinkle my bell for Louis, and have him sent out of the house immediately."

"You shall not irritate me, Mr. Fairlie--for your niece's sake and for her father's sake, you shall not irritate me. You shall take the whole responsibility of this discreditable settlement on your own shoulders before I leave the room."

"Don't!--now please don't!" said Mr. Fairlie. "Think how precious your time is, Gilmore, and don't throw it away. I would dispute with you if I could, but I can't--I haven't stamina enough. You want to upset me, to upset yourself, to upset Glyde, and to upset Laura; and--oh, dear me!--all for the sake of the very last thing in the world that is likely to happen. No, dear friend, in the interests of peace and quietness, positively No!"

"I am to understand, then, that you hold by the determination expressed in your letter?"

"Yes, please. So glad we understand each other at last. Sit down again--do!"

I walked at once to the door, and Mr. Fairlie resignedly "tinkled" his hand-bell. Before I left the room I turned round and addressed him for the last time.

"Whatever happens in the future, sir," I said, "remember that my plain duty of warning you has been performed. As the faithful friend and servant of

your family, I tell you, at parting, that no daughter of mine should be married to any man alive under such a settlement as you are forcing me to make for Miss Fairlie."

The door opened behind me, and the valet stood waiting on the threshold.

"Louis," said Mr. Fairlie, "show Mr. Gilmore out, and then come back and hold up my etchings for me again. Make them give you a good lunch downstairs. Do, Gilmore, make my idle beasts of servants give you a good lunch!"

I was too much disgusted to reply--I turned on my heel, and left him in silence. There was an up train at two o'clock in the afternoon, and by that train I returned to London.

On the Tuesday I sent in the altered settlement, which practically disinherited the very persons whom Miss Fairlie's own lips had informed me she was most anxious to benefit. I had no choice. Another lawyer would have drawn up the deed if I had refused to undertake it.

My task is done. My personal share in the events of the family story extends no farther than the point which I have just reached. Other pens than mine will describe the strange circumstances which are now shortly to follow. Seriously and sorrowfully I close this brief record. Seriously and sorrowfully I repeat here the parting words that I spoke at Limmeridge House:--No daughter of mine should have been married to any man alive under such a settlement as I was compelled to make for Laura Fairlie.

The End of Mr. Gilmore's Narrative.