THE THIRD EPOCH

THE STORY CONTINUED BY WALTER HARTRIGHT.

I

I open a new page. I advance my narrative by one week.

The history of the interval which I thus pass over must remain unrecorded. My heart turns faint, my mind sinks in darkness and confusion when I think of it. This must not be, if I who write am to guide, as I ought, you who read. This must not be, if the clue that leads through the windings of the story is to remain from end to end untangled in my hands.

A life suddenly changed--its whole purpose created afresh, its hopes and fears, its struggles, its interests, and its sacrifices all turned at once and for ever into a new direction--this is the prospect which now opens before me, like the burst of view from a mountain's top. I left my narrative in the quiet shadow of Limmeridge church--I resume it, one week later, in the stir and turmoil of a London street.

The street is in a populous and a poor neighbourhood. The ground floor of one of the houses in it is occupied by a small newsvendor's shop, and the first floor and the second are let as furnished lodgings of the humblest kind.

I have taken those two floors in an assumed name. On the upper floor I live, with a room to work in, a room to sleep in. On the lower floor, under the same assumed name, two women live, who are described as my sisters. I get my bread by drawing and engraving on wood for the cheap periodicals. My sisters are supposed to help me by taking in a little needle-work. Our poor place of abode, our humble calling, our assumed relationship, and our assumed name, are all used alike as a means of hiding us in the house-forest of London. We are numbered no longer with the people whose lives are open and known. I am an obscure, unnoticed man, without patron or friend to help me. Marian Halcombe is nothing now but my eldest sister,

who provides for our household wants by the toil of her own hands. We two, in the estimation of others, are at once the dupes and the agents of a daring imposture. We are supposed to be the accomplices of mad Anne Catherick, who claims the name, the place, and the living personality of dead Lady Glyde.

That is our situation. That is the changed aspect in which we three must appear, henceforth, in this narrative, for many and many a page to come.

In the eye of reason and of law, in the estimation of relatives and friends, according to every received formality of civilised society, "Laura, Lady Glyde," lay buried with her mother in Limmeridge churchyard. Torn in her own lifetime from the list of the living, the daughter of Philip Fairlie and the wife of Percival Glyde might still exist for her sister, might still exist for me, but to all the world besides she was dead. Dead to her uncle, who had renounced her; dead to the servants of the house, who had failed to recognise her; dead to the persons in authority, who had transmitted her fortune to her husband and her aunt; dead to my mother and my sister, who believed me to be the dupe of an adventuress and the victim of a fraud; socially, morally, legally--dead.

And yet alive! Alive in poverty and in hiding. Alive, with the poor drawing-master to fight her battle, and to win the way back for her to her place in the world of living beings.

Did no suspicion, excited by my own knowledge of Anne Catherick's resemblance to her, cross my mind, when her face was first revealed to me? Not the shadow of a suspicion, from the moment when she lifted her veil by the side of the inscription which recorded her death.

Before the sun of that day had set, before the last glimpse of the home which was closed against her had passed from our view, the farewell words I spoke, when we parted at Limmeridge House, had been recalled by both of us--repeated by me, recognised by her. "If ever the time comes, when the devotion of my whole heart and soul and strength will give you a moment's happiness, or spare you a moment's sorrow, will you try to remember the poor drawing-master who has taught you?" She, who now remembered so little of the trouble and terror of a later time, remembered those words, and laid her poor head innocently and trustingly on the bosom of the man who had spoken them. In that moment, when she called me by my name, when she said, "They have tried to make me forget everything, Walter; but I remember Marian, and I remember YOU"--in that moment, I, who had long since given her my love, gave her my life, and thanked God that it was mine

to bestow on her. Yes! the time had come. From thousands on thousands of miles away--through forest and wilderness, where companions stronger than I had fallen by my side, through peril of death thrice renewed, and thrice escaped, the Hand that leads men on the dark road to the future had led me to meet that time. Forlorn and disowned, sorely tried and sadly changed--her beauty faded, her mind clouded--robbed of her station in the world, of her place among living creatures--the devotion I had promised, the devotion of my whole heart and soul and strength, might be laid blamelessly now at those dear feet. In the right of her calamity, in the right of her friendlessness, she was mine at last! Mine to support, to protect, to cherish, to restore. Mine to love and honour as father and brother both. Mine to vindicate through all risks and all sacrifices--through the hopeless struggle against Rank and Power, through the long fight with armed deceit and fortified Success, through the waste of my reputation, through the loss of my friends, through the hazard of my life.

II

My position is defined--my motives are acknowledged. The story of Marian and the story of Laura must come next.

I shall relate both narratives, not in the words (often interrupted, often inevitably confused) of the speakers themselves, but in the words of the brief, plain, studiously simple abstract which I committed to writing for my own guidance, and for the guidance of my legal adviser. So the tangled web will be most speedily and most intelligibly unrolled.

The story of Marian begins where the narrative of the housekeeper at Blackwater Park left off.

On Lady Glyde's departure from her husband's house, the fact of that departure, and the necessary statement of the circumstances under which it had taken place, were communicated to Miss Halcombe by the housekeeper. It was not till some days afterwards (how many days exactly, Mrs. Michelson, in the absence of any written memorandum on the subject, could not undertake to say) that a letter arrived from Madame Fosco announcing Lady Glyde's sudden death in Count Fosco's house. The letter avoided mentioning dates, and left it to Mrs. Michelson's discretion to break the news at once to Miss Halcombe, or to defer doing so until that lady's health

should be more firmly established.

Having consulted Mr. Dawson (who had been himself delayed, by ill health, in resuming his attendance at Blackwater Park), Mrs. Michelson, by the doctor's advice, and in the doctor's presence, communicated the news, either on the day when the letter was received, or on the day after. It is not necessary to dwell here upon the effect which the intelligence of Lady Glyde's sudden death produced on her sister. It is only useful to the present purpose to say that she was not able to travel for more than three weeks afterwards. At the end of that time she proceeded to London accompanied by the housekeeper. They parted there--Mrs. Michelson previously informing Miss Halcombe of her address, in case they might wish to communicate at a future period.

On parting with the housekeeper Miss Halcombe went at once to the office of Messrs. Gilmore & Kyrle to consult with the latter gentleman in Mr. Gilmore's absence. She mentioned to Mr. Kyrle what she had thought it desirable to conceal from every one else (Mrs. Michelson included)--her suspicion of the circumstances under which Lady Glyde was said to have met her death. Mr. Kyrle, who had previously given friendly proof of his anxiety to serve Miss Halcombe, at once undertook to make such inquiries as the delicate and dangerous nature of the investigation proposed to him would permit.

To exhaust this part of the subject before going farther, it may be mentioned that Count Fosco offered every facility to Mr. Kyrle, on that gentleman's stating that he was sent by Miss Halcombe to collect such particulars as had not yet reached her of Lady Glyde's decease. Mr. Kyrle was placed in communication with the medical man, Mr. Goodricke, and with the two servants. In the absence of any means of ascertaining the exact date of Lady Glyde's departure from Blackwater Park, the result of the doctor's and the servants' evidence, and of the volunteered statements of Count Fosco and his wife, was conclusive to the mind of Mr. Kyrle. He could only assume that the intensity of Miss Halcombe's suffering, under the loss of her sister, had misled her judgment in a most deplorable manner, and he wrote her word that the shocking suspicion to which she had alluded in his presence was, in his opinion, destitute of the smallest fragment of foundation in truth. Thus the investigation by Mr. Gilmore's partner began and ended.

Meanwhile, Miss Halcombe had returned to Limmeridge House, and had there collected all the additional information which she was able to obtain.

Mr. Fairlie had received his first intimation of his niece's death from his

sister, Madame Fosco, this letter also not containing any exact reference to dates. He had sanctioned his sister's proposal that the deceased lady should be laid in her mother's grave in Limmeridge churchyard. Count Fosco had accompanied the remains to Cumberland, and had attended the funeral at Limmeridge, which took place on the 30th of July. It was followed, as a mark of respect, by all the inhabitants of the village and the neighbourhood. On the next day the inscription (originally drawn out, it was said, by the aunt of the deceased lady, and submitted for approval to her brother, Mr. Fairlie) was engraved on one side of the monument over the tomb.

On the day of the funeral, and for one day after it, Count Fosco had been received as a guest at Limmeridge House, but no interview had taken place between Mr. Fairlie and himself, by the former gentleman's desire. They had communicated by writing, and through this medium Count Fosco had made Mr. Fairlie acquainted with the details of his niece's last illness and death. The letter presenting this information added no new facts to the facts already known, but one very remarkable paragraph was contained in the postscript. It referred to Anne Catherick.

The substance of the paragraph in question was as follows--

It first informed Mr. Fairlie that Anne Catherick (of whom he might hear full particulars from Miss Halcombe when she reached Limmeridge) had been traced and recovered in the neighbourhood of Blackwater Park, and had been for the second time placed under the charge of the medical man from whose custody she had once escaped.

This was the first part of the postscript. The second part warned Mr. Fairlie that Anne Catherick's mental malady had been aggravated by her long freedom from control, and that the insane hatred and distrust of Sir Percival Glyde, which had been one of her most marked delusions in former times, still existed under a newly-acquired form. The unfortunate woman's last idea in connection with Sir Percival was the idea of annoying and distressing him, and of elevating herself, as she supposed, in the estimation of the patients and nurses, by assuming the character of his deceased wife, the scheme of this personation having evidently occurred to her after a stolen interview which she had succeeded in obtaining with Lady Glyde, and at which she had observed the extraordinary accidental likeness between the deceased lady and herself. It was to the last degree improbable that she would succeed a second time in escaping from the Asylum, but it was just possible she might find some means of annoying the late Lady Glyde's relatives with letters, and in that case Mr. Fairlie was warned beforehand

how to receive them.

The postscript, expressed in these terms, was shown to Miss Halcombe when she arrived at Limmeridge. There were also placed in her possession the clothes Lady Glyde had worn, and the other effects she had brought with her to her aunt's house. They had been carefully collected and sent to Cumberland by Madame Fosco.

Such was the posture of affairs when Miss Halcombe reached Limmeridge in the early part of September.

Shortly afterwards she was confined to her room by a relapse, her weakened physical energies giving way under the severe mental affliction from which she was now suffering. On getting stronger again, in a month's time, her suspicion of the circumstances described as attending her sister's death still remained unshaken. She had heard nothing in the interim of Sir Percival Glyde, but letters had reached her from Madame Fosco, making the most affectionate inquiries on the part of her husband and herself. Instead of answering these letters, Miss Halcombe caused the house in St. John's Wood, and the proceedings of its inmates, to be privately watched.

Nothing doubtful was discovered. The same result attended the next investigations, which were secretly instituted on the subject of Mrs. Rubelle. She had arrived in London about six months before with her husband. They had come from Lyons, and they had taken a house in the neighbourhood of Leicester Square, to be fitted up as a boarding-house for foreigners, who were expected to visit England in large numbers to see the Exhibition of 1851. Nothing was known against husband or wife in the neighbourhood. They were quiet people, and they had paid their way honestly up to the present time. The final inquiries related to Sir Percival Glyde. He was settled in Paris, and living there quietly in a small circle of English and French friends.

Foiled at all points, but still not able to rest, Miss Halcombe next determined to visit the Asylum in which she then supposed Anne Catherick to be for the second time confined. She had felt a strong curiosity about the woman in former days, and she was now doubly interested--first, in ascertaining whether the report of Anne Catherick's attempted personation of Lady Glyde was true, and secondly (if it proved to be true), in discovering for herself what the poor creature's real motives were for attempting the deceit.

Although Count Fosco's letter to Mr. Fairlie did not mention the address of the Asylum, that important omission cast no difficulties in Miss Halcombe's

way. When Mr. Hartright had met Anne Catherick at Limmeridge, she had informed him of the locality in which the house was situated, and Miss Halcombe had noted down the direction in her diary, with all the other particulars of the interview exactly as she heard them from Mr. Hartright's own lips. Accordingly she looked back at the entry and extracted the address--furnished herself with the Count's letter to Mr. Fairlie as a species of credential which might be useful to her, and started by herself for the Asylum on the eleventh of October.

She passed the night of the eleventh in London. It had been her intention to sleep at the house inhabited by Lady Glyde's old governess, but Mrs. Vesey's agitation at the sight of her lost pupil's nearest and dearest friend was so distressing that Miss Halcombe considerately refrained from remaining in her presence, and removed to a respectable boarding-house in the neighbourhood, recommended by Mrs. Vesey's married sister. The next day she proceeded to the Asylum, which was situated not far from London on the northern side of the metropolis.

She was immediately admitted to see the proprietor.

At first he appeared to be decidedly unwilling to let her communicate with his patient. But on her showing him the postscript to Count Fosco's letter--on her reminding him that she was the "Miss Halcombe" there referred to--that she was a near relative of the deceased Lady Glyde--and that she was therefore naturally interested, for family reasons, in observing for herself the extent of Anne Catherick's delusion in relation to her late sister--the tone and manner of the owner of the Asylum altered, and he withdrew his objections. He probably felt that a continued refusal, under these circumstances, would not only be an act of discourtesy in itself, but would also imply that the proceedings in his establishment were not of a nature to bear investigation by respectable strangers.

Miss Halcombe's own impression was that the owner of the Asylum had not been received into the confidence of Sir Percival and the Count. His consenting at all to let her visit his patient seemed to afford one proof of this, and his readiness in making admissions which could scarcely have escaped the lips of an accomplice, certainly appeared to furnish another.

For example, in the course of the introductory conversation which took place, he informed Miss Halcombe that Anne Catherick had been brought back to him with the necessary order and certificates by Count Fosco on the twenty-seventh of July--the Count also producing a letter of explanations and instructions signed by Sir Percival Glyde. On receiving his inmate

again, the proprietor of the Asylum acknowledged that he had observed some curious personal changes in her. Such changes no doubt were not without precedent in his experience of persons mentally afflicted. Insane people were often at one time, outwardly as well as inwardly, unlike what they were at another--the change from better to worse, or from worse to better, in the madness having a necessary tendency to produce alterations of appearance externally. He allowed for these, and he allowed also for the modification in the form of Anne Catherick's delusion, which was reflected no doubt in her manner and expression. But he was still perplexed at times by certain differences between his patient before she had escaped and his patient since she had been brought back. Those differences were too minute to be described. He could not say of course that she was absolutely altered in height or shape or complexion, or in the colour of her hair and eyes, or in the general form of her face--the change was something that he felt more than something that he saw. In short, the case had been a puzzle from the first, and one more perplexity was added to it now.

It cannot be said that this conversation led to the result of even partially preparing Miss Halcombe's mind for what was to come. But it produced, nevertheless, a very serious effect upon her. She was so completely unnerved by it, that some little time elapsed before she could summon composure enough to follow the proprietor of the Asylum to that part of the house in which the inmates were confined.

On inquiry, it turned out that the supposed Anne Catherick was then taking exercise in the grounds attached to the establishment. One of the nurses volunteered to conduct Miss Halcombe to the place, the proprietor of the Asylum remaining in the house for a few minutes to attend to a case which required his services, and then engaging to join his visitor in the grounds.

The nurse led Miss Halcombe to a distant part of the property, which was prettily laid out, and after looking about her a little, turned into a turf walk, shaded by a shrubbery on either side. About half-way down this walk two women were slowly approaching. The nurse pointed to them and said, "There is Anne Catherick, ma'am, with the attendant who waits on her. The attendant will answer any questions you wish to put." With those words the nurse left her to return to the duties of the house.

Miss Halcombe advanced on her side, and the women advanced on theirs. When they were within a dozen paces of each other, one of the women stopped for an instant, looked eagerly at the strange lady, shook off the nurse's grasp on her, and the next moment rushed into Miss Halcombe's arms. In that moment Miss Halcombe recognised her sister--recognised the

dead-alive.

Fortunately for the success of the measures taken subsequently, no one was present at that moment but the nurse. She was a young woman, and she was so startled that she was at first quite incapable of interfering. When she was able to do so her whole services were required by Miss Halcombe, who had for the moment sunk altogether in the effort to keep her own senses under the shock of the discovery. After waiting a few minutes in the fresh air and the cool shade, her natural energy and courage helped her a little, and she became sufficiently mistress of herself to feel the necessity of recalling her presence of mind for her unfortunate sister's sake.

She obtained permission to speak alone with the patient, on condition that they both remained well within the nurse's view. There was no time for questions--there was only time for Miss Halcombe to impress on the unhappy lady the necessity of controlling herself, and to assure her of immediate help and rescue if she did so. The prospect of escaping from the Asylum by obedience to her sister's directions was sufficient to quiet Lady Glyde, and to make her understand what was required of her. Miss Halcombe next returned to the nurse, placed all the gold she then had in her pocket (three sovereigns) in the nurse's hands, and asked when and where she could speak to her alone.

The woman was at first surprised and distrustful. But on Miss Halcombe's declaring that she only wanted to put some questions which she was too much agitated to ask at that moment, and that she had no intention of misleading the nurse into any dereliction of duty, the woman took the money, and proposed three o'clock on the next day as the time for the interview. She might then slip out for half an hour, after the patients had dined, and she would meet the lady in a retired place, outside the high north wall which screened the grounds of the house. Miss Halcombe had only time to assent, and to whisper to her sister that she should hear from her on the next day, when the proprietor of the Asylum joined them. He noticed his visitor's agitation, which Miss Halcombe accounted for by saying that her interview with Anne Catherick had a little startled her at first. She took her leave as soon after as possible--that is to say, as soon as she could summon courage to force herself from the presence of her unfortunate sister.

A very little reflection, when the capacity to reflect returned, convinced her that any attempt to identify Lady Glyde and to rescue her by legal means, would, even if successful, involve a delay that might be fatal to her sister's intellects, which were shaken already by the horror of the situation to which she had been consigned. By the time Miss Halcombe had got back to

London, she had determined to effect Lady Glyde's escape privately, by means of the nurse.

She went at once to her stockbroker, and sold out of the funds all the little property she possessed, amounting to rather less than seven hundred pounds. Determined, if necessary, to pay the price of her sister's liberty with every farthing she had in the world, she repaired the next day, having the whole sum about her in bank-notes, to her appointment outside the Asylum wall.

The nurse was there. Miss Halcombe approached the subject cautiously by many preliminary questions. She discovered, among other particulars, that the nurse who had in former times attended on the true Anne Catherick had been held responsible (although she was not to blame for it) for the patient's escape, and had lost her place in consequence. The same penalty, it was added, would attach to the person then speaking to her, if the supposed Anne Catherick was missing a second time; and, moreover, the nurse in this case had an especial interest in keeping her place. She was engaged to be married, and she and her future husband were waiting till they could save, together, between two and three hundred pounds to start in business. The nurse's wages were good, and she might succeed, by strict economy, in contributing her small share towards the sum required in two years' time.

On this hint Miss Halcombe spoke. She declared that the supposed Anne Catherick was nearly related to her, that she had been placed in the Asylum under a fatal mistake, and that the nurse would be doing a good and a Christian action in being the means of restoring them to one another. Before there was time to start a single objection, Miss Halcombe took four bank-notes of a hundred pounds each from her pocket-book, and offered them to the woman, as a compensation for the risk she was to run, and for the loss of her place.

The nurse hesitated, through sheer incredulity and surprise. Miss Halcombe pressed the point on her firmly.

"You will be doing a good action," she repeated; "you will be helping the most injured and unhappy woman alive. There is your marriage portion for a reward. Bring her safely to me here, and I will put these four bank-notes into your hand before I claim her."

"Will you give me a letter saying those words, which I can show to my sweetheart when he asks how I got the money?" inquired the woman.

"I will bring the letter with me, ready written and signed," answered Miss Halcombe.

"Then I'll risk it," said the nurse.

"When?"

"To-morrow."

It was hastily agreed between them that Miss Halcombe should return early the next morning and wait out of sight among the trees--always, however, keeping near the quiet spot of ground under the north wall. The nurse could fix no time for her appearance, caution requiring that she should wait and be guided by circumstances. On that understanding they separated.

Miss Halcombe was at her place, with the promised letter and the promised bank-notes, before ten the next morning. She waited more than an hour and a half. At the end of that time the nurse came quickly round the corner of the wall holding Lady Glyde by the arm. The moment they met Miss Halcombe put the bank-notes and the letter into her hand, and the sisters were united again.

The nurse had dressed Lady Glyde, with excellent forethought, in a bonnet, veil, and shawl of her own. Miss Halcombe only detained her to suggest a means of turning the pursuit in a false direction, when the escape was discovered at the Asylum. She was to go back to the house, to mention in the hearing of the other nurses that Anne Catherick had been inquiring latterly about the distance from London to Hampshire, to wait till the last moment, before discovery was inevitable, and then to give the alarm that Anne was missing. The supposed inquiries about Hampshire, when communicated to the owner of the Asylum, would lead him to imagine that his patient had returned to Blackwater Park, under the influence of the delusion which made her persist in asserting herself to be Lady Glyde, and the first pursuit would, in all probability, be turned in that direction.

The nurse consented to follow these suggestions, the more readily as they offered her the means of securing herself against any worse consequences than the loss of her place, by remaining in the Asylum, and so maintaining the appearance of innocence, at least. She at once returned to the house, and Miss Halcombe lost no time in taking her sister back with her to London. They caught the afternoon train to Carlisle the same afternoon, and arrived at Limmeridge, without accident or difficulty of any kind, that night.

During the latter part of their journey they were alone in the carriage, and Miss Halcombe was able to collect such remembrances of the past as her sister's confused and weakened memory was able to recall. The terrible story of the conspiracy so obtained was presented in fragments, sadly incoherent in themselves, and widely detached from each other. Imperfect as the revelation was, it must nevertheless be recorded here before this explanatory narrative closes with the events of the next day at Limmeridge House.

Lady Glyde's recollection of the events which followed her departure from Blackwater Park began with her arrival at the London terminus of the South Western Railway. She had omitted to make a memorandum beforehand of the day on which she took the journey. All hope of fixing that important date by any evidence of hers, or of Mrs. Michelson's, must be given up for lost.

On the arrival of the train at the platform Lady Glyde found Count Fosco waiting for her. He was at the carriage door as soon as the porter could open it. The train was unusually crowded, and there was great confusion in getting the luggage. Some person whom Count Fosco brought with him procured the luggage which belonged to Lady Glyde. It was marked with her name. She drove away alone with the Count in a vehicle which she did not particularly notice at the time.

Her first question, on leaving the terminus, referred to Miss Halcombe. The Count informed her that Miss Halcombe had not yet gone to Cumberland, after-consideration having caused him to doubt the prudence of her taking so long a journey without some days' previous rest.

Lady Glyde next inquired whether her sister was then staying in the Count's house. Her recollection of the answer was confused, her only distinct impression in relation to it being that the Count declared he was then taking her to see Miss Halcombe. Lady Glyde's experience of London was so limited that she could not tell, at the time, through what streets they were driving. But they never left the streets, and they never passed any gardens or trees. When the carriage stopped, it stopped in a small street behind a square--a square in which there were shops, and public buildings, and many people. From these recollections (of which Lady Glyde was certain) it seems quite clear that Count Fosco did not take her to his own residence in the suburb of St. John's Wood.

They entered the house, and went upstairs to a back room, either on the

first or second floor. The luggage was carefully brought in. A female servant opened the door, and a man with a dark beard, apparently a foreigner, met them in the hall, and with great politeness showed them the way upstairs. In answer to Lady Glyde's inquiries, the Count assured her that Miss Halcombe was in the house, and that she should be immediately informed of her sister's arrival. He and the foreigner then went away and left her by herself in the room. It was poorly furnished as a sitting-room, and it looked out on the backs of houses.

The place was remarkably quiet--no footsteps went up or down the stairs--she only heard in the room beneath her a dull, rumbling sound of men's voices talking. Before she had been long left alone the Count returned, to explain that Miss Halcombe was then taking rest, and could not be disturbed for a little while. He was accompanied into the room by a gentleman (an Englishman), whom he begged to present as a friend of his.

After this singular introduction--in the course of which no names, to the best of Lady Glyde's recollection, had been mentioned--she was left alone with the stranger. He was perfectly civil, but he startled and confused her by some odd questions about herself, and by looking at her, while he asked them, in a strange manner. After remaining a short time he went out, and a minute or two afterwards a second stranger--also an Englishman--came in. This person introduced himself as another friend of Count Fosco's, and he, in his turn, looked at her very oddly, and asked some curious questions--never, as well as she could remember, addressing her by name, and going out again, after a little while, like the first man. By this time she was so frightened about herself, and so uneasy about her sister, that she had thoughts of venturing downstairs again, and claiming the protection and assistance of the only woman she had seen in the house--the servant who answered the door.

Just as she had risen from her chair, the Count came back into the room.

The moment he appeared she asked anxiously how long the meeting between her sister and herself was to be still delayed. At first he returned an evasive answer, but on being pressed, he acknowledged, with great apparent reluctance, that Miss Halcombe was by no means so well as he had hitherto represented her to be. His tone and manner, in making this reply, so alarmed Lady Glyde, or rather so painfully increased the uneasiness which she had felt in the company of the two strangers, that a sudden faintness overcame her, and she was obliged to ask for a glass of water. The Count called from the door for water, and for a bottle of smelling-salts. Both were brought in by the foreign-looking man with the beard. The

water, when Lady Glyde attempted to drink it, had so strange a taste that it increased her faintness, and she hastily took the bottle of salts from Count Fosco, and smelt at it. Her head became giddy on the instant. The Count caught the bottle as it dropped out of her hand, and the last impression of which she was conscious was that he held it to her nostrils again.

From this point her recollections were found to be confused, fragmentary, and difficult to reconcile with any reasonable probability.

Her own impression was that she recovered her senses later in the evening, that she then left the house, that she went (as she had previously arranged to go, at Blackwater Park) to Mrs. Vesey's--that she drank tea there, and that she passed the night under Mrs. Vesey's roof. She was totally unable to say how, or when, or in what company she left the house to which Count Fosco had brought her. But she persisted in asserting that she had been to Mrs. Vesey's, and still more extraordinary, that she had been helped to undress and get to bed by Mrs. Rubelle! She could not remember what the conversation was at Mrs. Vesey's or whom she saw there besides that lady, or why Mrs. Rubelle should have been present in the house to help her.

Her recollection of what happened to her the next morning was still more vague and unreliable.

She had some dim idea of driving out (at what hour she could not say) with Count Fosco, and with Mrs. Rubelle again for a female attendant. But when, and why, she left Mrs. Vesey she could not tell; neither did she know what direction the carriage drove in, or where it set her down, or whether the Count and Mrs. Rubelle did or did not remain with her all the time she was out. At this point in her sad story there was a total blank. She had no impressions of the faintest kind to communicate--no idea whether one day, or more than one day, had passed--until she came to herself suddenly in a strange place, surrounded by women who were all unknown to her.

This was the Asylum. Here she first heard herself called by Anne Catherick's name, and here, as a last remarkable circumstance in the story of the conspiracy, her own eyes informed her that she had Anne Catherick's clothes on. The nurse, on the first night in the Asylum, had shown her the marks on each article of her underclothing as it was taken off, and had said, not at all irritably or unkindly, "Look at your own name on your own clothes, and don't worry us all any more about being Lady Glyde. She's dead and buried, and you're alive and hearty. Do look at your clothes now! There it is, in good marking ink, and there you will find it on all your old things, which we have kept in the house--Anne Catherick, as plain as print!"

And there it was, when Miss Halcombe examined the linen her sister wore, on the night of their arrival at Limmeridge House.

These were the only recollections--all of them uncertain, and some of them contradictory--which could be extracted from Lady Glyde by careful questioning on the journey to Cumberland. Miss Halcombe abstained from pressing her with any inquiries relating to events in the Asylum--her mind being but too evidently unfit to bear the trial of reverting to them. It was known, by the voluntary admission of the owner of the mad-house, that she was received there on the twenty-seventh of July. From that date until the fifteenth of October (the day of her rescue) she had been under restraint, her identity with Anne Catherick systematically asserted, and her sanity, from first to last, practically denied. Faculties less delicately balanced, constitutions less tenderly organised, must have suffered under such an ordeal as this. No man could have gone through it and come out of it unchanged.

Arriving at Limmeridge late on the evening of the fifteenth, Miss Halcombe wisely resolved not to attempt the assertion of Lady Glyde's identity until the next day.

The first thing in the morning she went to Mr. Fairlie's room, and using all possible cautions and preparations beforehand, at last told him in so many words what had happened. As soon as his first astonishment and alarm had subsided, he angrily declared that Miss Halcombe had allowed herself to be duped by Anne Catherick. He referred her to Count Fosco's letter, and to what she had herself told him of the personal resemblance between Anne and his deceased niece, and he positively declined to admit to his presence, even for one minute only, a madwoman, whom it was an insult and an outrage to have brought into his house at all.

Miss Halcombe left the room--waited till the first heat of her indignation had passed away--decided on reflection that Mr. Fairlie should see his niece in the interests of common humanity before he closed his doors on her as a stranger--and thereupon, without a word of previous warning, took Lady Glyde with her to his room. The servant was posted at the door to prevent their entrance, but Miss Halcombe insisted on passing him, and made her way into Mr. Fairlie's presence, leading her sister by the hand.

The scene that followed, though it only lasted for a few minutes, was too painful to be described--Miss Halcombe herself shrank from referring to it. Let it be enough to say that Mr. Fairlie declared, in the most positive terms, that he did not recognise the woman who had been brought into his room--

that he saw nothing in her face and manner to make him doubt for a moment that his niece lay buried in Limmeridge churchyard, and that he would call on the law to protect him if before the day was over she was not removed from the house.

Taking the very worst view of Mr. Fairlie's selfishness, indolence, and habitual want of feeling, it was manifestly impossible to suppose that he was capable of such infamy as secretly recognising and openly disowning his brother's child. Miss Halcombe humanely and sensibly allowed all due force to the influence of prejudice and alarm in preventing him from fairly exercising his perceptions, and accounted for what had happened in that way. But when she next put the servants to the test, and found that they too were, in every case, uncertain, to say the least of it, whether the lady presented to them was their young mistress or Anne Catherick, of whose resemblance to her they had all heard, the sad conclusion was inevitable that the change produced in Lady Glyde's face and manner by her imprisonment in the Asylum was far more serious than Miss Halcombe had at first supposed. The vile deception which had asserted her death defied exposure even in the house where she was born, and among the people with whom she had lived.

In a less critical situation the effort need not have been given up as hopeless even yet.

For example, the maid, Fanny, who happened to be then absent from Limmeridge, was expected back in two days, and there would be a chance of gaining her recognition to start with, seeing that she had been in much more constant communication with her mistress, and had been much more heartily attached to her than the other servants. Again, Lady Glyde might have been privately kept in the house or in the village to wait until her health was a little recovered and her mind was a little steadied again. When her memory could be once more trusted to serve her, she would naturally refer to persons and events in the past with a certainty and a familiarity which no impostor could simulate, and so the fact of her identity, which her own appearance had failed to establish, might subsequently be proved, with time to help her, by the surer test of her own words.

But the circumstances under which she had regained her freedom rendered all recourse to such means as these simply impracticable. The pursuit from the Asylum, diverted to Hampshire for the time only, would infallibly next take the direction of Cumberland. The persons appointed to seek the fugitive might arrive at Limmeridge House at a few hours' notice, and in Mr. Fairlie's present temper of mind they might count on the immediate exertion

of his local influence and authority to assist them. The commonest consideration for Lady Glyde's safety forced on Miss Halcombe the necessity of resigning the struggle to do her justice, and of removing her at once from the place of all others that was now most dangerous to her--the neighbourhood of her own home.

An immediate return to London was the first and wisest measure of security which suggested itself. In the great city all traces of them might be most speedily and most surely effaced. There were no preparations to make--no farewell words of kindness to exchange with any one. On the afternoon of that memorable day of the sixteenth Miss Halcombe roused her sister to a last exertion of courage, and without a living soul to wish them well at parting, the two took their way into the world alone, and turned their backs for ever on Limmeridge House.

They had passed the hill above the churchyard, when Lady Glyde insisted on turning back to look her last at her mother's grave. Miss Halcombe tried to shake her resolution, but, in this one instance, tried in vain. She was immovable. Her dim eyes lit with a sudden fire, and flashed through the veil that hung over them--her wasted fingers strengthened moment by moment round the friendly arm by which they had held so listlessly till this time. I believe in my soul that the hand of God was pointing their way back to them, and that the most innocent and the most afflicted of His creatures was chosen in that dread moment to see it.

They retraced their steps to the burial-ground, and by that act sealed the future of our three lives.

III

This was the story of the past--the story so far as we knew it then.

Two obvious conclusions presented themselves to my mind after hearing it. In the first place, I saw darkly what the nature of the conspiracy had been, how chances had been watched, and how circumstances had been handled to ensure impunity to a daring and an intricate crime. While all details were still a mystery to me, the vile manner in which the personal resemblance between the woman in white and Lady Glyde had been turned to account was clear beyond a doubt. It was plain that Anne Catherick had been introduced into Count Fosco's house as Lady Glyde--it was plain that Lady

Glyde had taken the dead woman's place in the Asylum--the substitution having been so managed as to make innocent people (the doctor and the two servants certainly, and the owner of the mad-house in all probability) accomplices in the crime.

The second conclusion came as the necessary consequence of the first. We three had no mercy to expect from Count Fosco and Sir Percival Glyde. The success of the conspiracy had brought with it a clear gain to those two men of thirty thousand pounds--twenty thousand to one, ten thousand to the other through his wife. They had that interest, as well as other interests, in ensuring their impunity from exposure, and they would leave no stone unturned, no sacrifice unattempted, no treachery untried, to discover the place in which their victim was concealed, and to part her from the only friends she had in the world--Marian Halcombe and myself.

The sense of this serious peril--a peril which every day and every hour might bring nearer and nearer to us--was the one influence that guided me in fixing the place of our retreat. I chose it in the far east of London, where there were fewest idle people to lounge and look about them in the streets. I chose it in a poor and a populous neighbourhood--because the harder the struggle for existence among the men and women about us, the less the risk of their having the time or taking the pains to notice chance strangers who came among them. These were the great advantages I looked to, but our locality was a gain to us also in another and a hardly less important respect. We could live cheaply by the daily work of my hands, and could save every farthing we possessed to forward the purpose, the righteous purpose, of redressing an infamous wrong--which, from first to last, I now kept steadily in view.

In a week's time Marian Halcombe and I had settled how the course of our new lives should be directed.

There were no other lodgers in the house, and we had the means of going in and out without passing through the shop. I arranged, for the present at least, that neither Marian nor Laura should stir outside the door without my being with them, and that in my absence from home they should let no one into their rooms on any pretence whatever. This rule established, I went to a friend whom I had known in former days--a wood engraver in large practice--to seek for employment, telling him, at the same time, that I had reasons for wishing to remain unknown.

He at once concluded that I was in debt, expressed his regret in the usual forms, and then promised to do what he could to assist me. I left his false

impression undisturbed, and accepted the work he had to give. He knew that he could trust my experience and my industry. I had what he wanted, steadiness and facility, and though my earnings were but small, they sufficed for our necessities. As soon as we could feel certain of this, Marian Halcombe and I put together what we possessed. She had between two and three hundred pounds left of her own property, and I had nearly as much remaining from the purchase-money obtained by the sale of my drawing-master's practice before I left England. Together we made up between us more than four hundred pounds. I deposited this little fortune in a bank, to be kept for the expense of those secret inquiries and investigations which I was determined to set on foot, and to carry on by myself if I could find no one to help me. We calculated our weekly expenditure to the last farthing, and we never touched our little fund except in Laura's interests and for Laura's sake.

The house-work, which, if we had dared trust a stranger near us, would have been done by a servant, was taken on the first day, taken as her own right, by Marian Halcombe. "What a woman's hands ARE fit for," she said, "early and late, these hands of mine shall do." They trembled as she held them out. The wasted arms told their sad story of the past, as she turned up the sleeves of the poor plain dress that she wore for safety's sake; but the unquenchable spirit of the woman burnt bright in her even yet. I saw the big tears rise thick in her eyes, and fall slowly over her cheeks as she looked at me. She dashed them away with a touch of her old energy, and smiled with a faint reflection of her old good spirits. "Don't doubt my courage, Walter," she pleaded, "it's my weakness that cries, not ME. The house-work shall conquer it if I can't." And she kept her word--the victory was won when we met in the evening, and she sat down to rest. Her large steady black eyes looked at me with a flash of their bright firmness of bygone days. "I am not quite broken down yet," she said. "I am worth trusting with my share of the work." Before I could answer, she added in a whisper, "And worth trusting with my share in the risk and the danger too. Remember that, if the time comes!"

I did remember it when the time came.

As early as the end of October the daily course of our lives had assumed its settled direction, and we three were as completely isolated in our place of concealment as if the house we lived in had been a desert island, and the great network of streets and the thousands of our fellow-creatures all round us the waters of an illimitable sea. I could now reckon on some leisure time

for considering what my future plan of action should be, and how I might arm myself most securely at the outset for the coming struggle with Sir Percival and the Count.

I gave up all hope of appealing to my recognition of Laura, or to Marian's recognition of her, in proof of her identity. If we had loved her less dearly, if the instinct implanted in us by that love had not been far more certain than any exercise of reasoning, far keener than any process of observation, even we might have hesitated on first seeing her.

The outward changes wrought by the suffering and the terror of the past had fearfully, almost hopelessly, strengthened the fatal resemblance between Anne Catherick and herself. In my narrative of events at the time of my residence in Limmeridge House, I have recorded, from my own observation of the two, how the likeness, striking as it was when viewed generally, failed in many important points of similarity when tested in detail. In those former days, if they had both been seen together side by side, no person could for a moment have mistaken them one for the other--as has happened often in the instances of twins. I could not say this now. The sorrow and suffering which I had once blamed myself for associating even by a passing thought with the future of Laura Fairlie, HAD set their profaning marks on the youth and beauty of her face; and the fatal resemblance which I had once seen and shuddered at seeing, in idea only, was now a real and living resemblance which asserted itself before my own eyes. Strangers, acquaintances, friends even who could not look at her as we looked, if she had been shown to them in the first days of her rescue from the Asylum, might have doubted if she were the Laura Fairlie they had once seen, and doubted without blame.

The one remaining chance, which I had at first thought might be trusted to serve us--the chance of appealing to her recollection of persons and events with which no impostor could be familiar, was proved, by the sad test of our later experience, to be hopeless. Every little caution that Marian and I practised towards her--every little remedy we tried, to strengthen and steady slowly the weakened, shaken faculties, was a fresh protest in itself against the risk of turning her mind back on the troubled and the terrible past.

The only events of former days which we ventured on encouraging her to recall were the little trivial domestic events of that happy time at Limmeridge, when I first went there and taught her to draw. The day when I roused those remembrances by showing her the sketch of the summer-house which she had given me on the morning of our farewell, and which had never been separated from me since, was the birthday of our first hope.

Tenderly and gradually, the memory of the old walks and drives dawned upon her, and the poor weary pining eyes looked at Marian and at me with a new interest, with a faltering thoughtfulness in them, which from that moment we cherished and kept alive. I bought her a little box of colours, and a sketch-book like the old sketch-book which I had seen in her hands on the morning that we first met. Once again--oh me, once again!--at spare hours saved from my work, in the dull London light, in the poor London room, I sat by her side to guide the faltering touch, to help the feeble hand. Day by day I raised and raised the new interest till its place in the blank of her existence was at last assured--till she could think of her drawing and talk of it, and patiently practise it by herself, with some faint reflection of the innocent pleasure in my encouragement, the growing enjoyment in her own progress, which belonged to the lost life and the lost happiness of past days.

We helped her mind slowly by this simple means, we took her out between us to walk on fine days, in a quiet old City square near at hand, where there was nothing to confuse or alarm her--we spared a few pounds from the fund at the banker's to get her wine, and the delicate strengthening food that she required--we amused her in the evenings with children's games at cards, with scrap-books full of prints which I borrowed from the engraver who employed me--by these, and other trifling attentions like them, we composed her and steadied her, and hoped all things, as cheerfully as we could from time and care, and love that never neglected and never despaired of her. But to take her mercilessly from seclusion and repose--to confront her with strangers, or with acquaintances who were little better than strangers--to rouse the painful impressions of her past life which we had so carefully hushed to rest--this, even in her own interests, we dared not do. Whatever sacrifices it cost, whatever long, weary, heartbreaking delays it involved, the wrong that had been inflicted on her, if mortal means could grapple it, must be redressed without her knowledge and without her help.

This resolution settled, it was next necessary to decide how the first risk should be ventured, and what the first proceedings should be.

After consulting with Marian, I resolved to begin by gathering together as many facts as could be collected--then to ask the advice of Mr. Kyrle (whom we knew we could trust), and to ascertain from him, in the first instance, if the legal remedy lay fairly within our reach. I owed it to Laura's interests not to stake her whole future on my own unaided exertions, so long as there was the faintest prospect of strengthening our position by obtaining reliable assistance of any kind.

The first source of information to which I applied was the journal kept at

Blackwater Park by Marian Halcombe. There were passages in this diary relating to myself which she thought it best that I should not see. Accordingly, she read to me from the manuscript, and I took the notes I wanted as she went on. We could only find time to pursue this occupation by sitting up late at night. Three nights were devoted to the purpose, and were enough to put me in possession of all that Marian could tell.

My next proceeding was to gain as much additional evidence as I could procure from other people without exciting suspicion. I went myself to Mrs. Vesey to ascertain if Laura's impression of having slept there was correct or not. In this case, from consideration for Mrs. Vesey's age and infirmity, and in all subsequent cases of the same kind from considerations of caution, I kept our real position a secret, and was always careful to speak of Laura as "the late Lady Glyde."

Mrs. Vesey's answer to my inquiries only confirmed the apprehensions which I had previously felt. Laura had certainly written to say she would pass the night under the roof of her old friend--but she had never been near the house.

Her mind in this instance, and, as I feared, in other instances besides, confusedly presented to her something which she had only intended to do in the false light of something which she had really done. The unconscious contradiction of herself was easy to account for in this way--but it was likely to lead to serious results. It was a stumble on the threshold at starting--it was a flaw in the evidence which told fatally against us.

When I next asked for the letter which Laura had written to Mrs. Vesey from Blackwater Park, it was given to me without the envelope, which had been thrown into the wastepaper basket, and long since destroyed. In the letter itself no date was mentioned--not even the day of the week. It only contained these lines:--"Dearest Mrs. Vesey, I am in sad distress and anxiety, and I may come to your house to-morrow night, and ask for a bed. I can't tell you what is the matter in this letter--I write it in such fear of being found out that I can fix my mind on nothing. Pray be at home to see me. I will give you a thousand kisses, and tell you everything. Your affectionate Laura." What help was there in those lines? None.

On returning from Mrs. Vesey's, I instructed Marian to write (observing the same caution which I practised myself) to Mrs. Michelson. She was to express, if she pleased, some general suspicion of Count Fosco's conduct, and she was to ask the housekeeper to supply us with a plain statement of events, in the interests of truth. While we were waiting for the answer,

which reached us in a week's time, I went to the doctor in St. John's Wood, introducing myself as sent by Miss Halcombe to collect, if possible, more particulars of her sister's last illness than Mr. Kyrle had found the time to procure. By Mr. Goodricke's assistance, I obtained a copy of the certificate of death, and an interview with the woman (Jane Gould) who had been employed to prepare the body for the grave. Through this person I also discovered a means of communicating with the servant, Hester Pinhorn. She had recently left her place in consequence of a disagreement with her mistress, and she was lodging with some people in the neighbourhood whom Mrs. Gould knew. In the manner here indicated I obtained the Narratives of the housekeeper, of the doctor, of Jane Gould, and of Hester Pinhorn, exactly as they are presented in these pages.

Furnished with such additional evidence as these documents afforded, I considered myself to be sufficiently prepared for a consultation with Mr. Kyrle, and Marian wrote accordingly to mention my name to him, and to specify the day and hour at which I requested to see him on private business.

There was time enough in the morning for me to take Laura out for her walk as usual, and to see her quietly settled at her drawing afterwards. She looked up at me with a new anxiety in her face as I rose to leave the room, and her fingers began to toy doubtfully, in the old way, with the brushes and pencils on the table.

"You are not tired of me yet?" she said. "You are not going away because you are tired of me? I will try to do better--I will try to get well. Are you as fond of me, Walter as you used to be, now I am so pale and thin, and so slow in learning to draw?"

She spoke as a child might have spoken, she showed me her thoughts as a child might have shown them. I waited a few minutes longer--waited to tell her that she was dearer to me now than she had ever been in the past times. "Try to get well again," I said, encouraging the new hope in the future which I saw dawning in her mind, "try to get well again, for Marian's sake and for mine."

"Yes," she said to herself, returning to her drawing. "I must try, because they are both so fond of me." She suddenly looked up again. "Don't be gone long! I can't get on with my drawing, Walter, when you are not here to help me."

"I shall soon be back, my darling--soon be back to see how you are getting

on."

My voice faltered a little in spite of me. I forced myself from the room. It was no time, then, for parting with the self-control which might yet serve me in my need before the day was out.

As I opened the door, I beckoned to Marian to follow me to the stairs. It was necessary to prepare her for a result which I felt might sooner or later follow my showing myself openly in the streets.

"I shall, in all probability, be back in a few hours," I said, "and you will take care, as usual, to let no one inside the doors in my absence. But if anything happens----"

"What can happen?" she interposed quickly. "Tell me plainly, Walter, if there is any danger, and I shall know how to meet it."

"The only danger," I replied, "is that Sir Percival Glyde may have been recalled to London by the news of Laura's escape. You are aware that he had me watched before I left England, and that he probably knows me by sight, although I don't know him?"

She laid her hand on my shoulder and looked at me in anxious silence. I saw she understood the serious risk that threatened us.

"It is not likely," I said, "that I shall be seen in London again so soon, either by Sir Percival himself or by the persons in his employ. But it is barely possible that an accident may happen. In that case, you will not be alarmed if I fail to return to-night, and you will satisfy any inquiry of Laura's with the best excuse that you can make for me? If I find the least reason to suspect that I am watched, I will take good care that no spy follows me back to this house. Don't doubt my return, Marian, however it may be delayed--and fear nothing."

"Nothing!" she answered firmly. "You shall not regret, Walter, that you have only a woman to help you." She paused, and detained me for a moment longer. "Take care!" she said, pressing my hand anxiously--"take care!"

I left her, and set forth to pave the way for discovery--the dark and doubtful way, which began at the lawyer's door.

IV

No circumstance of the slightest importance happened on my way to the offices of Messrs. Gilmore & Kyrle, in Chancery Lane.

While my card was being taken in to Mr. Kyrle, a consideration occurred to me which I deeply regretted not having thought of before. The information derived from Marian's diary made it a matter of certainty that Count Fosco had opened her first letter from Blackwater Park to Mr. Kyrle, and had, by means of his wife, intercepted the second. He was therefore well aware of the address of the office, and he would naturally infer that if Marian wanted advice and assistance, after Laura's escape from the Asylum, she would apply once more to the experience of Mr. Kyrle. In this case the office in Chancery Lane was the very first place which he and Sir Percival would cause to be watched, and if the same persons were chosen for the purpose who had been employed to follow me, before my departure from England, the fact of my return would in all probability be ascertained on that very day. I had thought, generally, of the chances of my being recognised in the streets, but the special risk connected with the office had never occurred to me until the present moment. It was too late now to repair this unfortunate error in judgment--too late to wish that I had made arrangements for meeting the lawyer in some place privately appointed beforehand. I could only resolve to be cautious on leaving Chancery Lane, and not to go straight home again under any circumstances whatever.

After waiting a few minutes I was shown into Mr. Kyrle's private room. He was a pale, thin, quiet, self-possessed man, with a very attentive eye, a very low voice, and a very undemonstrative manner--not (as I judged) ready with his sympathy where strangers were concerned, and not at all easy to disturb in his professional composure. A better man for my purpose could hardly have been found. If he committed himself to a decision at all, and if the decision was favourable, the strength of our case was as good as proved from that moment.

"Before I enter on the business which brings me here," I said, "I ought to warn you, Mr. Kyrle, that the shortest statement I can make of it may occupy some little time."

"My time is at Miss Halcombe's disposal," he replied. "Where any interests of hers are concerned, I represent my partner personally, as well as professionally. It was his request that I should do so, when he ceased to

take an active part in business."

"May I inquire whether Mr. Gilmore is in England?"

"He is not, he is living with his relatives in Germany. His health has improved, but the period of his return is still uncertain."

While we were exchanging these few preliminary words, he had been searching among the papers before him, and he now produced from them a sealed letter. I thought he was about to hand the letter to me, but, apparently changing his mind, he placed it by itself on the table, settled himself in his chair, and silently waited to hear what I had to say.

Without wasting a moment in prefatory words of any sort, I entered on my narrative, and put him in full possession of the events which have already been related in these pages.

Lawyer as he was to the very marrow of his bones, I startled him out of his professional composure. Expressions of incredulity and surprise, which he could not repress, interrupted me several times before I had done. I persevered, however, to the end, and as soon as I reached it, boldly asked the one important question--

"What is your opinion, Mr. Kyrle?"

He was too cautious to commit himself to an answer without taking time to recover his self-possession first.

"Before I give my opinion," he said, "I must beg permission to clear the ground by a few questions."

He put the questions--sharp, suspicious, unbelieving questions, which clearly showed me, as they proceeded, that he thought I was the victim of a delusion, and that he might even have doubted, but for my introduction to him by Miss Halcombe, whether I was not attempting the perpetration of a cunningly-designed fraud.

"Do you believe that I have spoken the truth, Mr. Kyrle?" I asked, when he had done examining me.

"So far as your own convictions are concerned, I am certain you have spoken the truth," he replied. "I have the highest esteem for Miss Halcombe, and I have therefore every reason to respect a gentleman whose mediation

she trusts in a matter of this kind. I will even go farther, if you like, and admit, for courtesy's sake and for argument's sake, that the identity of Lady Glyde as a living person is a proved fact to Miss Halcombe and yourself. But you come to me for a legal opinion. As a lawyer, and as a lawyer only, it is my duty to tell you, Mr. Hartright, that you have not the shadow of a case."

"You put it strongly, Mr. Kyrle."

"I will try to put it plainly as well. The evidence of Lady Glyde's death is, on the face of it, clear and satisfactory. There is her aunt's testimony to prove that she came to Count Fosco's house, that she fell ill, and that she died. There is the testimony of the medical certificate to prove the death, and to show that it took place under natural circumstances. There is the fact of the funeral at Limmeridge, and there is the assertion of the inscription on the tomb. That is the case you want to overthrow. What evidence have you to support the declaration on your side that the person who died and was buried was not Lady Glyde? Let us run through the main points of your statement and see what they are worth. Miss Halcombe goes to a certain private Asylum, and there sees a certain female patient. It is known that a woman named Anne Catherick, and bearing an extraordinary personal resemblance to Lady Glyde, escaped from the Asylum; it is known that the person received there last July was received as Anne Catherick brought back; it is known that the gentleman who brought her back warned Mr. Fairlie that it was part of her insanity to be bent on personating his dead niece; and it is known that she did repeatedly declare herself in the Asylum (where no one believed her) to be Lady Glyde. These are all facts. What have you to set against them? Miss Halcombe's recognition of the woman, which recognition after-events invalidate or contradict. Does Miss Halcombe assert her supposed sister's identity to the owner of the Asylum, and take legal means for rescuing her? No, she secretly bribes a nurse to let her escape. When the patient has been released in this doubtful manner, and is taken to Mr. Fairlie, does he recognise her? Is he staggered for one instant in his belief of his niece's death? No. Do the servants recognise her? No. Is she kept in the neighbourhood to assert her own identity, and to stand the test of further proceedings? No, she is privately taken to London. In the meantime you have recognised her also, but you are not a relative--you are not even an old friend of the family. The servants contradict you, and Mr. Fairlie contradicts Miss Halcombe, and the supposed Lady Glyde contradicts herself. She declares she passed the night in London at a certain house. Your own evidence shows that she has never been near that house, and your own admission is that her condition of mind prevents you from producing her anywhere to submit to investigation, and to speak for herself. I pass over minor points of evidence on both sides to save time, and I ask

you, if this case were to go now into a court of law--to go before a jury, bound to take facts as they reasonably appear--where are your proofs?"

I was obliged to wait and collect myself before I could answer him. It was the first time the story of Laura and the story of Marian had been presented to me from a stranger's point of view--the first time the terrible obstacles that lay across our path had been made to show themselves in their true character.

"There can be no doubt," I said, "that the facts, as you have stated them, appear to tell against us, but----"

"But you think those facts can be explained away," interposed Mr. Kyrle. "Let me tell you the result of my experience on that point. When an English jury has to choose between a plain fact ON the surface and a long explanation UNDER the surface, it always takes the fact in preference to the explanation. For example, Lady Glyde (I call the lady you represent by that name for argument's sake) declares she has slept at a certain house, and it is proved that she has not slept at that house. You explain this circumstance by entering into the state of her mind, and deducing from it a metaphysical conclusion. I don't say the conclusion is wrong--I only say that the jury will take the fact of her contradicting herself in preference to any reason for the contradiction that you can offer."

"But is it not possible," I urged, "by dint of patience and exertion, to discover additional evidence? Miss Halcombe and I have a few hundred pounds----"

He looked at me with a half-suppressed pity, and shook his head.

"Consider the subject, Mr. Hartright, from your own point of view," he said. "If you are right about Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco (which I don't admit, mind), every imaginable difficulty would be thrown in the way of your getting fresh evidence. Every obstacle of litigation would be raised--every point in the case would be systematically contested--and by the time we had spent our thousands instead of our hundreds, the final result would, in all probability, be against us. Questions of identity, where instances of personal resemblance are concerned, are, in themselves, the hardest of all questions to settle--the hardest, even when they are free from the complications which beset the case we are now discussing. I really see no prospect of throwing any light whatever on this extraordinary affair. Even if the person buried in Limmeridge churchyard be not Lady Glyde, she was, in life, on your own showing, so like her, that we should gain nothing, if we applied for the necessary authority to have the body exhumed. In short,

there is no case, Mr. Hartright--there is really no case."

I was determined to believe that there WAS a case, and in that determination shifted my ground, and appealed to him once more.

"Are there not other proofs that we might produce besides the proof of identity?" I asked.

"Not as you are situated," he replied. "The simplest and surest of all proofs, the proof by comparison of dates, is, as I understand, altogether out of your reach. If you could show a discrepancy between the date of the doctor's certificate and the date of Lady Glyde's journey to London, the matter would wear a totally different aspect, and I should be the first to say, Let us go on."

"That date may yet be recovered, Mr. Kyrle."

"On the day when it is recovered, Mr. Hartright, you will have a case. If you have any prospect, at this moment, of getting at it--tell me, and we shall see if I can advise you."

I considered. The housekeeper could not help us--Laura could not help us--Marian could not help us. In all probability, the only persons in existence who knew the date were Sir Percival and the Count.

"I can think of no means of ascertaining the date at present," I said, "because I can think of no persons who are sure to know it, but Count Fosco and Sir Percival Glyde."

Mr. Kyrle's calmly attentive face relaxed, for the first time, into a smile.

"With your opinion of the conduct of those two gentlemen," he said, "you don't expect help in that quarter, I presume? If they have combined to gain large sums of money by a conspiracy, they are not likely to confess it, at any rate."

"They may be forced to confess it, Mr. Kyrle."

"By whom?"

"By me."

We both rose. He looked me attentively in the face with more appearance of interest than he had shown yet. I could see that I had perplexed him a little.

"You are very determined," he said. "You have, no doubt, a personal motive for proceeding, into which it is not my business to inquire. If a case can be produced in the future, I can only say, my best assistance is at your service. At the same time I must warn you, as the money question always enters into the law question, that I see little hope, even if you ultimately established the fact of Lady Glyde's being alive, of recovering her fortune. The foreigner would probably leave the country before proceedings were commenced, and Sir Percival's embarrassments are numerous enough and pressing enough to transfer almost any sum of money he may possess from himself to his creditors. You are of course aware----"

I stopped him at that point.

"Let me beg that we may not discuss Lady Glyde's affairs," I said. "I have never known anything about them in former times, and I know nothing of them now--except that her fortune is lost. You are right in assuming that I have personal motives for stirring in this matter. I wish those motives to be always as disinterested as they are at the present moment----"

He tried to interpose and explain. I was a little heated, I suppose, by feeling that he had doubted me, and I went on bluntly, without waiting to hear him.

"There shall be no money motive," I said, "no idea of personal advantage in the service I mean to render to Lady Glyde. She has been cast out as a stranger from the house in which she was born--a lie which records her death has been written on her mother's tomb--and there are two men, alive and unpunished, who are responsible for it. That house shall open again to receive her in the presence of every soul who followed the false funeral to the grave--that lie shall be publicly erased from the tombstone by the authority of the head of the family, and those two men shall answer for their crime to ME, though the justice that sits in tribunals is powerless to pursue them. I have given my life to that purpose, and, alone as I stand, if God spares me, I will accomplish it."

He drew back towards his table, and said nothing. His face showed plainly that he thought my delusion had got the better of my reason, and that he considered it totally useless to give me any more advice.

"We each keep our opinion, Mr. Kyrle," I said, "and we must wait till the events of the future decide between us. In the meantime, I am much obliged to you for the attention you have given to my statement. You have shown me that the legal remedy lies, in every sense of the word, beyond our means.

We cannot produce the law proof, and we are not rich enough to pay the law expenses. It is something gained to know that."

I bowed and walked to the door. He called me back and gave me the letter which I had seen him place on the table by itself at the beginning of our interview.

"This came by post a few days ago," he said. "Perhaps you will not mind delivering it? Pray tell Miss Halcombe, at the same time, that I sincerely regret being, thus far, unable to help her, except by advice, which will not be more welcome, I am afraid, to her than to you."

I looked at the letter while he was speaking. It was addressed to "Miss Halcombe. Care of Messrs. Gilmore & Kyrle, Chancery Lane." The handwriting was quite unknown to me.

On leaving the room I asked one last question.

"Do you happen to know," I said, "if Sir Percival Glyde is still in Paris?"

"He has returned to London," replied Mr. Kyrle. "At least I heard so from his solicitor, whom I met yesterday."

After that answer I went out.

On leaving the office the first precaution to be observed was to abstain from attracting attention by stopping to look about me. I walked towards one of the quietest of the large squares on the north of Holborn, then suddenly stopped and turned round at a place where a long stretch of pavement was left behind me.

There were two men at the corner of the square who had stopped also, and who were standing talking together. After a moment's reflection I turned back so as to pass them. One moved as I came near, and turned the corner leading from the square into the street. The other remained stationary. I looked at him as I passed and instantly recognised one of the men who had watched me before I left England.

If I had been free to follow my own instincts, I should probably have begun by speaking to the man, and have ended by knocking him down. But I was bound to consider consequences. If I once placed myself publicly in the wrong, I put the weapons at once into Sir Percival's hands. There was no choice but to oppose cunning by cunning. I turned into the street down

which the second man had disappeared, and passed him, waiting in a doorway. He was a stranger to me, and I was glad to make sure of his personal appearance in case of future annoyance. Having done this, I again walked northward till I reached the New Road. There I turned aside to the west (having the men behind me all the time), and waited at a point where I knew myself to be at some distance from a cab-stand, until a fast two-wheel cab, empty, should happen to pass me. One passed in a few minutes. I jumped in and told the man to drive rapidly towards Hyde Park. There was no second fast cab for the spies behind me. I saw them dart across to the other side of the road, to follow me by running, until a cab or a cab-stand came in their way. But I had the start of them, and when I stopped the driver and got out, they were nowhere in sight. I crossed Hyde Park and made sure, on the open ground, that I was free. When I at last turned my steps homewards, it was not till many hours later--not till after dark.

I found Marian waiting for me alone in the little sitting-room. She had persuaded Laura to go to rest, after first promising to show me her drawing the moment I came in. The poor little dim faint sketch--so trifling in itself, so touching in its associations--was propped up carefully on the table with two books, and was placed where the faint light of the one candle we allowed ourselves might fall on it to the best advantage. I sat down to look at the drawing, and to tell Marian, in whispers, what had happened. The partition which divided us from the next room was so thin that we could almost hear Laura's breathing, and we might have disturbed her if we had spoken aloud.

Marian preserved her composure while I described my interview with Mr. Kyrle. But her face became troubled when I spoke next of the men who had followed me from the lawyer's office, and when I told her of the discovery of Sir Percival's return.

"Bad news, Walter," she said, "the worst news you could bring. Have you nothing more to tell me?"

"I have something to give you," I replied, handing her the note which Mr. Kyrle had confided to my care.

She looked at the address and recognised the handwriting instantly.

"You know your correspondent?" I said.

"Too well," she answered. "My correspondent is Count Fosco."

With that reply she opened the note. Her face flushed deeply while she read it--her eyes brightened with anger as she handed it to me to read in my turn.

The note contained these lines--

"Impelled by honourable admiration--honourable to myself, honourable to you--I write, magnificent Marian, in the interests of your tranquillity, to say two consoling words--

"Fear nothing!

"Exercise your fine natural sense and remain in retirement. Dear and admirable woman, invite no dangerous publicity. Resignation is sublime--adopt it. The modest repose of home is eternally fresh--enjoy it. The storms of life pass harmless over the valley of Seclusion--dwell, dear lady, in the valley.

"Do this and I authorise you to fear nothing. No new calamity shall lacerate your sensibilities--sensibilities precious to me as my own. You shall not be molested, the fair companion of your retreat shall not be pursued. She has found a new asylum in your heart. Priceless asylum!--I envy her and leave her there.

"One last word of affectionate warning, of paternal caution, and I tear myself from the charm of addressing you--I close these fervent lines.

"Advance no farther than you have gone already, compromise no serious interests, threaten nobody. Do not, I implore you, force me into action--ME, the Man of Action--when it is the cherished object of my ambition to be passive, to restrict the vast reach of my energies and my combinations for your sake. If you have rash friends, moderate their deplorable ardour. If Mr. Hartright returns to England, hold no communication with him. I walk on a path of my own, and Percival follows at my heels. On the day when Mr. Hartright crosses that path, he is a lost man."

The only signature to these lines was the initial letter F, surrounded by a circle of intricate flourishes. I threw the letter on the table with all the

contempt that I felt for it.

"He is trying to frighten you--a sure sign that he is frightened himself," I said.

She was too genuine a woman to treat the letter as I treated it. The insolent familiarity of the language was too much for her self-control. As she looked at me across the table, her hands clenched themselves in her lap, and the old quick fiery temper flamed out again brightly in her cheeks and her eyes.

"Walter!" she said, "if ever those two men are at your mercy, and if you are obliged to spare one of them, don't let it be the Count."

"I will keep this letter, Marian, to help my memory when the time comes."

She looked at me attentively as I put the letter away in my pocket-book.

"When the time comes?" she repeated. "Can you speak of the future as if you were certain of it?--certain after what you have heard in Mr. Kyrle's office, after what has happened to you to-day?"

"I don't count the time from to-day, Marian. All I have done to-day is to ask another man to act for me. I count from to-morrow----"

"Why from to-morrow?"

"Because to-morrow I mean to act for myself."

"How?"

"I shall go to Blackwater by the first train, and return, I hope, at night."

"To Blackwater!"

"Yes. I have had time to think since I left Mr. Kyrle. His opinion on one point confirms my own. We must persist to the last in hunting down the date of Laura's journey. The one weak point in the conspiracy, and probably the one chance of proving that she is a living woman, centre in the discovery of that date."

"You mean," said Marian, "the discovery that Laura did not leave Blackwater Park till after the date of her death on the doctor's certificate?"

"Certainly."

"What makes you think it might have been AFTER? Laura can tell us nothing of the time she was in London."

"But the owner of the Asylum told you that she was received there on the twenty-seventh of July. I doubt Count Fosco's ability to keep her in London, and to keep her insensible to all that was passing around her, more than one night. In that case, she must have started on the twenty-sixth, and must have come to London one day after the date of her own death on the doctor's certificate. If we can prove that date, we prove our case against Sir Percival and the Count."

"Yes, yes--I see! But how is the proof to be obtained?"

"Mrs. Michelson's narrative has suggested to me two ways of trying to obtain it. One of them is to question the doctor, Mr. Dawson, who must know when he resumed his attendance at Blackwater Park after Laura left the house. The other is to make inquiries at the inn to which Sir Percival drove away by himself at night. We know that his departure followed Laura's after the lapse of a few hours, and we may get at the date in that way. The attempt is at least worth making, and to-morrow I am determined it shall be made."

"And suppose it fails--I look at the worst now, Walter; but I will look at the best if disappointments come to try us--suppose no one can help you at Blackwater?"

"There are two men who can help me, and shall help me in London--Sir Percival and the Count. Innocent people may well forget the date--but THEY are guilty, and THEY know it. If I fail everywhere else, I mean to force a confession out of one or both of them on my own terms."

All the woman flushed up in Marian's face as I spoke.

"Begin with the Count," she whispered eagerly. "For my sake, begin with the Count."

"We must begin, for Laura's sake, where there is the best chance of success," I replied.

The colour faded from her face again, and she shook her head sadly.

"Yes," she said, "you are right--it was mean and miserable of me to say that. I try to be patient, Walter, and succeed better now than I did in happier times. But I have a little of my old temper still left, and it will get the better of me when I think of the Count!"

"His turn will come," I said. "But, remember, there is no weak place in his life that we know of yet." I waited a little to let her recover her self-possession, and then spoke the decisive words--

"Marian! There is a weak place we both know of in Sir Percival's life----"

"You mean the Secret!"

"Yes: the Secret. It is our only sure hold on him. I can force him from his position of security, I can drag him and his villainy into the face of day, by no other means. Whatever the Count may have done, Sir Percival has consented to the conspiracy against Laura from another motive besides the motive of gain. You heard him tell the Count that he believed his wife knew enough to ruin him? You heard him say that he was a lost man if the secret of Anne Catherick was known?"

"Yes! yes! I did."

"Well, Marian, when our other resources have failed us, I mean to know the Secret. My old superstition clings to me, even yet. I say again the woman in white is a living influence in our three lives. The End is appointed--the End is drawing us on--and Anne Catherick, dead in her grave, points the way to it still!"

V

The story of my first inquiries in Hampshire is soon told.

My early departure from London enabled me to reach Mr. Dawson's house in the forenoon. Our interview, so far as the object of my visit was concerned, led to no satisfactory result.

Mr. Dawson's books certainly showed when he had resumed his attendance on Miss Halcombe at Blackwater Park, but it was not possible to calculate back from this date with any exactness, without such help from Mrs. Michelson as I knew she was unable to afford. She could not say from memory (who, in similar cases, ever can?) how many days had elapsed between the renewal of the doctor's attendance on his patient and the previous departure of Lady Glyde. She was almost certain of having mentioned the circumstance of the departure to Miss Halcombe, on the day after it happened--but then she was no more able to fix the date of the day on which this disclosure took place, than to fix the date of the day before, when Lady Glyde had left for London. Neither could she calculate, with any nearer approach to exactness, the time that had passed from the departure of her mistress, to the period when the undated letter from Madame Fosco arrived. Lastly, as if to complete the series of difficulties, the doctor himself, having been ill at the time, had omitted to make his usual entry of the day of the week and month when the gardener from Blackwater Park had called on him to deliver Mrs. Michelson's message.

Hopeless of obtaining assistance from Mr. Dawson, I resolved to try next if I could establish the date of Sir Percival's arrival at Knowlesbury.

It seemed like a fatality! When I reached Knowlesbury the inn was shut up, and bills were posted on the walls. The speculation had been a bad one, as I was informed, ever since the time of the railway. The new hotel at the station had gradually absorbed the business, and the old inn (which we knew to be the inn at which Sir Percival had put up), had been closed about two months since. The proprietor had left the town with all his goods and chattels, and where he had gone I could not positively ascertain from any one. The four people of whom I inquired gave me four different accounts of his plans and projects when he left Knowlesbury.

There were still some hours to spare before the last train left for London, and I drove back again in a fly from the Knowlesbury station to Blackwater

Park, with the purpose of questioning the gardener and the person who kept the lodge. If they, too, proved unable to assist me, my resources for the present were at an end, and I might return to town.

I dismissed the fly a mile distant from the park, and getting my directions from the driver, proceeded by myself to the house.

As I turned into the lane from the high-road, I saw a man, with a carpet-bag, walking before me rapidly on the way to the lodge. He was a little man, dressed in shabby black, and wearing a remarkably large hat. I set him down (as well as it was possible to judge) for a lawyer's clerk, and stopped at once to widen the distance between us. He had not heard me, and he walked on out of sight, without looking back. When I passed through the gates myself, a little while afterwards, he was not visible--he had evidently gone on to the house.

There were two women in the lodge. One of them was old, the other I knew at once, by Marian's description of her, to be Margaret Porcher.

I asked first if Sir Percival was at the Park, and receiving a reply in the negative, inquired next when he had left it. Neither of the women could tell me more than that he had gone away in the summer. I could extract nothing from Margaret Porcher but vacant smiles and shakings of the head. The old woman was a little more intelligent, and I managed to lead her into speaking of the manner of Sir Percival's departure, and of the alarm that it caused her. She remembered her master calling her out of bed, and remembered his frightening her by swearing--but the date at which the occurrence happened was, as she honestly acknowledged, "quite beyond her."

On leaving the lodge I saw the gardener at work not far off. When I first addressed him, he looked at me rather distrustfully, but on my using Mrs. Michelson's name, with a civil reference to himself, he entered into conversation readily enough. There is no need to describe what passed between us--it ended, as all my other attempts to discover the date had ended. The gardener knew that his master had driven away, at night, "some time in July, the last fortnight or the last ten days in the month"--and knew no more.

While we were speaking together I saw the man in black, with the large hat, come out from the house, and stand at some little distance observing us.

Certain suspicions of his errand at Blackwater Park had already crossed my

mind. They were now increased by the gardener's inability (or unwillingness) to tell me who the man was, and I determined to clear the way before me, if possible, by speaking to him. The plainest question I could put as a stranger would be to inquire if the house was allowed to be shown to visitors. I walked up to the man at once, and accosted him in those words.

His look and manner unmistakably betrayed that he knew who I was, and that he wanted to irritate me into quarrelling with him. His reply was insolent enough to have answered the purpose, if I had been less determined to control myself. As it was, I met him with the most resolute politeness, apologised for my involuntary intrusion (which he called a "trespass,") and left the grounds. It was exactly as I suspected. The recognition of me when I left Mr. Kyrle's office had been evidently communicated to Sir Percival Glyde, and the man in black had been sent to the Park in anticipation of my making inquiries at the house or in the neighbourhood. If I had given him the least chance of lodging any sort of legal complaint against me, the interference of the local magistrate would no doubt have been turned to account as a clog on my proceedings, and a means of separating me from Marian and Laura for some days at least.

I was prepared to be watched on the way from Blackwater Park to the station, exactly as I had been watched in London the day before. But I could not discover at the time, whether I was really followed on this occasion or not. The man in black might have had means of tracking me at his disposal of which I was not aware, but I certainly saw nothing of him, in his own person, either on the way to the station, or afterwards on my arrival at the London terminus in the evening. I reached home on foot, taking the precaution, before I approached our own door, of walking round by the loneliest street in the neighbourhood, and there stopping and looking back more than once over the open space behind me. I had first learnt to use this stratagem against suspected treachery in the wilds of Central America--and now I was practising it again, with the same purpose and with even greater caution, in the heart of civilised London!

Nothing had happened to alarm Marian during my absence. She asked eagerly what success I had met with. When I told her she could not conceal her surprise at the indifference with which I spoke of the failure of my investigations thus far.

The truth was, that the ill-success of my inquiries had in no sense daunted me. I had pursued them as a matter of duty, and I had expected nothing from them. In the state of my mind at that time, it was almost a relief to me

to know that the struggle was now narrowed to a trial of strength between myself and Sir Percival Glyde. The vindictive motive had mingled itself all along with my other and better motives, and I confess it was a satisfaction to me to feel that the surest way, the only way left, of serving Laura's cause, was to fasten my hold firmly on the villain who had married her.

While I acknowledge that I was not strong enough to keep my motives above the reach of this instinct of revenge, I can honestly say something in my own favour on the other side. No base speculation on the future relations of Laura and myself, and on the private and personal concessions which I might force from Sir Percival if I once had him at my mercy, ever entered my mind. I never said to myself, "If I do succeed, it shall be one result of my success that I put it out of her husband's power to take her from me again." I could not look at her and think of the future with such thoughts as those. The sad sight of the change in her from her former self, made the one interest of my love an interest of tenderness and compassion which her father or her brother might have felt, and which I felt, God knows, in my inmost heart. All my hopes looked no farther on now than to the day of her recovery. There, till she was strong again and happy again--there, till she could look at me as she had once looked, and speak to me as she had once spoken--the future of my happiest thoughts and my dearest wishes ended.

These words are written under no prompting of idle self-contemplation. Passages in this narrative are soon to come which will set the minds of others in judgment on my conduct. It is right that the best and the worst of me should be fairly balanced before that time.

On the morning after my return from Hampshire I took Marian upstairs into my working-room, and there laid before her the plan that I had matured thus far, for mastering the one assailable point in the life of Sir Percival Glyde.

The way to the Secret lay through the mystery, hitherto impenetrable to all of us, of the woman in white. The approach to that in its turn might be gained by obtaining the assistance of Anne Catherick's mother, and the only ascertainable means of prevailing on Mrs. Catherick to act or to speak in the matter depended on the chance of my discovering local particulars and family particulars first of all from Mrs. Clements. After thinking the subject over carefully, I felt certain that I could only begin the new inquiries by placing myself in communication with the faithful friend and protectress of Anne Catherick.

The first difficulty then was to find Mrs. Clements.

I was indebted to Marian's quick perception for meeting this necessity at once by the best and simplest means. She proposed to write to the farm near Limmeridge (Todd's Corner), to inquire whether Mrs. Clements had communicated with Mrs. Todd during the past few months. How Mrs. Clements had been separated from Anne it was impossible for us to say, but that separation once effected, it would certainly occur to Mrs. Clements to inquire after the missing woman in the neighbourhood of all others to which she was known to be most attached--the neighbourhood of Limmeridge. I saw directly that Marian's proposal offered us a prospect of success, and she wrote to Mrs. Todd accordingly by that day's post.

While we were waiting for the reply, I made myself master of all the information Marian could afford on the subject of Sir Percival's family, and of his early life. She could only speak on these topics from hearsay, but she was reasonably certain of the truth of what little she had to tell.

Sir Percival was an only child. His father, Sir Felix Glyde, had suffered from his birth under a painful and incurable deformity, and had shunned all society from his earliest years. His sole happiness was in the enjoyment of music, and he had married a lady with tastes similar to his own, who was said to be a most accomplished musician. He inherited the Blackwater property while still a young man. Neither he nor his wife after taking possession, made advances of any sort towards the society of the neighbourhood, and no one endeavoured to tempt them into abandoning their reserve, with the one disastrous exception of the rector of the parish.

The rector was the worst of all innocent mischief-makers--an over-zealous man. He had heard that Sir Felix had left College with the character of being little better than a revolutionist in politics and an infidel in religion, and he arrived conscientiously at the conclusion that it was his bounden duty to summon the lord of the manor to hear sound views enunciated in the parish church. Sir Felix fiercely resented the clergyman's well-meant but ill-directed interference, insulting him so grossly and so publicly, that the families in the neighbourhood sent letters of indignant remonstrance to the Park, and even the tenants of the Blackwater property expressed their opinion as strongly as they dared. The baronet, who had no country tastes of any kind, and no attachment to the estate or to any one living on it, declared that society at Blackwater should never have a second chance of annoying him, and left the place from that moment.

After a short residence in London he and his wife departed for the Continent, and never returned to England again. They lived part of the time in France and part in Germany--always keeping themselves in the strict retirement which the morbid sense of his own personal deformity had made a necessity to Sir Felix. Their son, Percival, had been born abroad, and had been educated there by private tutors. His mother was the first of his parents whom he lost. His father had died a few years after her, either in 1825 or 1826. Sir Percival had been in England, as a young man, once or twice before that period, but his acquaintance with the late Mr. Fairlie did not begin till after the time of his father's death. They soon became very intimate, although Sir Percival was seldom, or never, at Limmeridge House in those days. Mr. Frederick Fairlie might have met him once or twice in Mr. Philip Fairlie's company, but he could have known little of him at that or at any other time. Sir Percival's only intimate friend in the Fairlie family had been Laura's father.

These were all the particulars that I could gain from Marian. They suggested nothing which was useful to my present purpose, but I noted them down carefully, in the event of their proving to be of importance at any future period.

Mrs. Todd's reply (addressed, by our own wish, to a post-office at some distance from us) had arrived at its destination when I went to apply for it. The chances, which had been all against us hitherto, turned from this moment in our favour. Mrs. Todd's letter contained the first item of information of which we were in search.

Mrs. Clements, it appeared, had (as we had conjectured) written to Todd's Corner, asking pardon in the first place for the abrupt manner in which she and Anne had left their friends at the farm-house (on the morning after I had met the woman in white in Limmeridge churchyard), and then informing Mrs. Todd of Anne's disappearance, and entreating that she would cause inquiries to be made in the neighbourhood, on the chance that the lost woman might have strayed back to Limmeridge. In making this request, Mrs. Clements had been careful to add to it the address at which she might always be heard of, and that address Mrs. Todd now transmitted to Marian. It was in London, and within half an hour's walk of our own lodging.

In the words of the proverb, I was resolved not to let the grass grow under my feet. The next morning I set forth to seek an interview with Mrs. Clements. This was my first step forward in the investigation. The story of the desperate attempt to which I now stood committed begins here.

VI

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mrs. Clements did all in her power to oppose the execution of this hazardous and unaccountable project. No explanation of her motives was

offered by Anne, except that she believed the day of her death was not far off, and that she had something on her mind which must be communicated to Lady Glyde, at any risk, in secret. Her resolution to accomplish this purpose was so firmly settled that she declared her intention of going to Hampshire by herself if Mrs. Clements felt any unwillingness to go with her. The doctor, on being consulted, was of opinion that serious opposition to her wishes would, in all probability, produce another and perhaps a fatal fit of illness, and Mrs. Clements, under this advice, yielded to necessity, and once more, with sad forebodings of trouble and danger to come, allowed Anne Catherick to have her own way.

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

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

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

In this emergency the first necessity, as Mrs. Clements knew by experience, was to endeavour to quiet Anne's anxiety of mind, and for this purpose the good woman went herself the next day to the lake, to try if she could find

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

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

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

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

Anne was asleep when they got there. The Count started at the sight of her (evidently from astonishment at her resemblance to Lady Glyde). Poor Mrs. Clements supposed that he was only shocked to see how ill she was. He would not allow her to be awakened--he was contented with putting questions to Mrs. Clements about her symptoms, with looking at her, and with lightly touching her pulse. Sandon was a large enough place to have a

grocer's and druggist's shop in it, and thither the Count went to write his prescription and to get the medicine made up. He brought it back himself, and told Mrs. Clements that the medicine was a powerful stimulant, and that it would certainly give Anne strength to get up and bear the fatigue of a journey to London of only a few hours. The remedy was to be administered at stated times on that day and on the day after. On the third day she would be well enough to travel, and he arranged to meet Mrs. Clements at the Blackwater station, and to see them off by the midday train. If they did not appear he would assume that Anne was worse, and would proceed at once to the cottage.

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

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

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

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

After waiting some time Mrs. Clements became alarmed, and ordered the cabman to drive back to her lodgings. When she got there, after an absence

of rather more than half an hour, Anne was gone.

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

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

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

VII

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, sir--neighbours at Old Welmingham."

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

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

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

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

"Was your husband acquainted with them before that?"

"With Catherick, sir--not with his wife. She was a stranger to both of us. Some gentlemen had made interest for Catherick, and he got the situation of clerk at Welmingham church, which was the reason of his coming to settle in our neighbourhood. He brought his newly-married wife along with him, and we heard in course of time she had been lady's-maid in a family that lived at Varneck Hall, near Southampton. Catherick had found it a hard matter to get her to marry him, in consequence of her holding herself

uncommonly high. He had asked and asked, and given the thing up at last, seeing she was so contrary about it. When he HAD given it up she turned contrary just the other way, and came to him of her own accord, without rhyme or reason seemingly. My poor husband always said that was the time to have given her a lesson. But Catherick was too fond of her to do anything of the sort--he never checked her either before they were married or after. He was a quick man in his feelings, letting them carry him a deal too far, now in one way and now in another, and he would have spoilt a better wife than Mrs. Catherick if a better had married him. I don't like to speak ill of any one, sir, but she was a heartless woman, with a terrible will of her own--fond of foolish admiration and fine clothes, and not caring to show so much as decent outward respect to Catherick, kindly as he always treated her. My husband said he thought things would turn out badly when they first came to live near us, and his words proved true. Before they had been quite four months in our neighbourhood there was a dreadful scandal and a miserable break-up in their household. Both of them were in fault--I am afraid both of them were equally in fault."

"You mean both husband and wife?"

"Oh, no, sir! I don't mean Catherick--he was only to be pitied. I meant his wife and the person--"

"And the person who caused the scandal?"

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

"Sir Percival Glyde?"

"Yes, Sir Percival Glyde."

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

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

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

England to fish in our river."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Did she accept the allowance?"

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

"Do you suppose that she had money of her own?"

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

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

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

hidden below the surface.

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

Reasoning on these assumptions, and always bearing in mind the one certain fact to guide me, that Mrs. Catherick was in possession of the Secret, I easily understood that it was Sir Percival's interest to keep her at Welmingham, because her character in that place was certain to isolate her from all communication with female neighbours, and to allow her no opportunities of talking incautiously in moments of free intercourse with inquisitive bosom friends. But what was the mystery to be concealed? Not Sir Percival's infamous connection with Mrs. Catherick's disgrace, for the neighbours were the very people who knew of it--not the suspicion that he was Anne's father, for Welmingham was the place in which that suspicion must inevitably exist. If I accepted the guilty appearances described to me as unreservedly as others had accepted them, if I drew from them the same superficial conclusion which Mr. Catherick and all his neighbours had drawn, where was the suggestion, in all that I had heard, of a dangerous secret between Sir Percival and Mrs. Catherick, which had been kept hidden from that time to this?

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

Was it possible that appearances in this case had pointed one way while the truth lay all the while unsuspected in another direction? Could Mrs. Catherick's assertion, that she was the victim of a dreadful mistake, by any possibility be true? Or, assuming it to be false, could the conclusion which associated Sir Percival with her guilt have been founded in some inconceivable error? Had Sir Percival, by any chance, courted the suspicion that was wrong for the sake of diverting from himself some other suspicion

that was right? Here--if I could find it--here was the approach to the Secret, hidden deep under the surface of the apparently unpromising story which I had just heard.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Was she like her mother, then?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, sir."

"And had she been long in her place?"

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

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

"Yes, sir. His name was Major Donthorne."

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

"Catherick never did, sir, that I can remember--nor any one else either, that I know of."

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

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

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

"Did Anne remain entirely under your care from that time?"

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

"And did Mrs. Catherick consent to your proposal?"

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

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

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

soul."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Dead!" said Mrs. Clements, "dead so young, and I am left to hear it! I made her first short frocks. I taught her to walk. The first time she ever said Mother she said it to me--and now I am left and Anne is taken! Did you say, sir," said the poor woman, removing the handkerchief from her face, and looking up at me for the first time, "did you say that she had been nicely buried? Was it the sort of funeral she might have had if she had really been my own child?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mrs. Catherick with the resolution to find it out."

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

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

Mrs. Clements looked me anxiously in the face.

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

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

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

Mrs. Clements sighed and shook her head doubtfully.

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

VIII

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

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

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

"What are you thinking of, Laura? Tell me, my darling--try and tell me what it is."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I took the first opportunity I could find of speaking to Marian in private, and

of communicating to her the result of the inquiries which I had made that morning. She seemed to share the opinion on the subject of my proposed journey to Welmingham, which Mrs. Clements had already expressed to me.

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

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

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

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

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

"We may deprive him of his weapons beforehand," I said. "Some of the particulars I have heard from Mrs. Clements may yet be turned to account against him, and other means of strengthening the case may be at our disposal. There are passages in Mrs. Michelson's narrative which show that the Count found it necessary to place himself in communication with Mr. Fairlie, and there may be circumstances which compromise him in that

proceeding. While I am away, Marian, write to Mr. Fairlie and say that you want an answer describing exactly what passed between the Count and himself, and informing you also of any particulars that may have come to his knowledge at the same time in connection with his niece. Tell him that the statement you request will, sooner or later, be insisted on, if he shows any reluctance to furnish you with it of his own accord."

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

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

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

As it was possible that I might be absent for some little time, I arranged with Marian that we were to correspond every day--of course addressing each other by assumed names, for caution's sake. As long as I heard from her regularly, I should assume that nothing was wrong. But if the morning came and brought me no letter, my return to London would take place, as a matter of course, by the first train. I contrived to reconcile Laura to my departure by telling her that I was going to the country to find new purchasers for her drawings and for mine, and I left her occupied and happy. Marian followed me downstairs to the street door.

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

"What makes you think we shall meet?" I asked.

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

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

With those words we parted.

I walked briskly to the station. There was a glow of hope in me. There was a growing conviction in my mind that my journey this time would not be taken in vain. It was a fine, clear, cold morning. My nerves were firmly strung,

and I felt all the strength of my resolution stirring in me vigorously from head to foot.

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

The train left me at Welmingham early in the afternoon.

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

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

by the intermittent knocking of a hammer nearer at hand. These were all the sights and sounds of life that encountered me when I entered the square.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the outset of our interview, on her own ground.

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

"I am perfectly aware of it."

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

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

"I have."

"Why?"

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

"Why?" I repeated. "Do you ask why I come here to tell you of your daughter's death?"

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

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

"You did very wrong."

"I am sorry to hear her mother say so."

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

"I am not at liberty to say how I know it--but I DO know it."

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

"Certainly. I got your address from Mrs. Clements."

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

"She did not."

"Then, I ask you again, why did you come?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I wish you good morning," she said.

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

"I HAVE another motive in coming here," I said.

"Ah! I thought so," remarked Mrs. Catherick.

"Your daughter's death----"

"What did she die of?"

"Of disease of the heart."

"Yes. Go on."

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

"Indeed!"

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

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

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

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

"Yes, I DO ask that."

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

"What have I to do with your determination?"

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

"What events do you mean?"

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

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

"What do you know of those events?" she asked.

"All that Mrs. Clements could tell me," I answered.

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

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

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

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

to be whipped out of the town at the cart's tail. Is your mother alive? Has she got a better Bible on her table than I have got on mine? Does she stand better with her trades-people than I do with mine? Has she always lived within her income? I have always lived within mine. Ah! there IS the clergyman coming along the square. Look, Mr. What's-your-name--look, if you please!"

She started up with the activity of a young woman, went to the window, waited till the clergyman passed, and bowed to him solemnly. The clergyman ceremoniously raised his hat, and walked on. Mrs. Catherick returned to her chair, and looked at me with a grimmer sarcasm than ever.

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

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

"How does your speculation look now?" she repeated.

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

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

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

"You won't trust me?" I said.

"No."

"You are afraid?"

"Do I look as if I was?"

"You are afraid of Sir Percival Glyde?"

"Am I?"

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

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

She amazed me beyond expression by suddenly bursting out laughing.

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

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

"I am not here to dispute with you about family questions," I said. "I know nothing of Sir Percival's mother----"

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

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

"What do you suspect?"

"I'll tell you what I DON'T suspect. I DON'T suspect him of being Anne's father."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Do you still refuse to trust me?" I asked.

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

"I do refuse," she said.

"Do you still tell me to go?"

"Yes. Go--and never come back."

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

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

"There is no news of Sir Percival that I don't expect, except----"

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

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

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

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

Mrs. Catherick had heard his footsteps approaching, in the silence of that lonely place, and she was on her feet at the window again, waiting for him. Not all the strength of all the terrible passions I had roused in that woman's heart, could loosen her desperate hold on the one fragment of social consideration which years of resolute effort had just dragged within her grasp. There she was again, not a minute after I had left her, placed purposely in a position which made it a matter of common courtesy on the part of the clergyman to bow to her for a second time. He raised his hat once more. I saw the hard ghastly face behind the window soften, and light up with gratified pride--I saw the head with the grim black cap bend ceremoniously in return. The clergyman had bowed to her, and in my presence, twice in one day!

IX

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

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

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

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

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

Before many days were over, there seemed every likelihood now that he and I might meet.

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

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

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

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

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

At the time when the neighbourhood of the vestry was first referred to in my presence by Mrs. Clements, I had thought it the strangest and most unaccountable of all places for Sir Percival to select for a clandestine meeting with the clerk's wife. Influenced by this impression, and by no other, I had mentioned "the vestry of the church" before Mrs. Catherick on pure speculation--it represented one of the minor peculiarities of the story

which occurred to me while I was speaking. I was prepared for her answering me confusedly or angrily, but the blank terror that seized her when I said the words took me completely by surprise. I had long before associated Sir Percival's Secret with the concealment of a serious crime which Mrs. Catherick knew of, but I had gone no further than this. Now the woman's paroxysm of terror associated the crime, either directly or indirectly, with the vestry, and convinced me that she had been more than the mere witness of it--she was also the accomplice, beyond a doubt.

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

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

Mrs. Catherick's undisguised contempt for Sir Percival plainly extended to his mother as well. She had referred with the bitterest sarcasm to the great family he had descended from--"especially by the mother's side." What did this mean?

There appeared to be only two explanations of it. Either his mother's birth had been low, or his mother's reputation was damaged by some hidden flaw with which Mrs. Catherick and Sir Percival were both privately acquainted? I could only put the first explanation to the test by looking at the register of her marriage, and so ascertaining her maiden name and her parentage as a preliminary to further inquiries.

On the other hand, if the second case supposed were the true one, what had been the flaw in her reputation? Remembering the account which Marian had given me of Sir Percival's father and mother, and of the suspiciously unsocial secluded life they had both led, I now asked myself whether it might not be possible that his mother had never been married at all. Here again the register might, by offering written evidence of the marriage, prove to me, at any rate, that this doubt had no foundation in truth. But where was the register to be found? At this point I took up the conclusions which I had previously formed, and the same mental process which had discovered the locality of the concealed crime, now lodged the register also in the vestry of Old Welmingham church.

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

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

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

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

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

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

watching me would have supplied it.

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

"It's well you came so early, sir," said the old man, when I had mentioned the object of my visit. "I should have been away in ten minutes more. Parish business, sir, and a goodish long trot before it's all done for a man at my age. But, bless you, I'm strong on my legs still! As long as a man don't give at his legs, there's a deal of work left in him. Don't you think so yourself, sir?"

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

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

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

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

"I'm obliged to bring you this way, sir," he said, "because the door from the

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

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

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

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

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

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

church, if not older."

"And why were they going to London? To be repaired?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Backwards from eighteen hundred and four."

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

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

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

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

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

you want."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sir Percival's mother.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Of course he is, sir! A lawyer in High Street, Knowlesbury--the old offices that his father had before him. The number of times I've swept those offices

out, and seen the old gentleman come trotting in to business on his white pony, looking right and left all down the street and nodding to everybody! Bless you, he was a popular character!--he'd have done in London!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

I proceeded on my way without letting the fellows see that I took any special notice of them. They caused me no conscious irritation of feeling at that moment--on the contrary, they rather revived my sinking hopes. In the surprise of discovering the evidence of the marriage, I had forgotten the inference I had drawn on first perceiving the men in the neighbourhood of the vestry. Their reappearance reminded me that Sir Percival had anticipated my visit to Old Welmingham church as the next result of my interview with Mrs. Catherick--otherwise he would never have placed his spies there to wait for me. Smoothly and fairly as appearances looked in the

vestry, there was something wrong beneath them--there was something in the register-book, for aught I knew, that I had not discovered yet.

X

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

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

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

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

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

A labourer was at work in an adjoining field who must have witnessed all that had passed. I called to him to follow us to the town. He shook his head with stolid obstinacy, and walked away in the direction of a cottage which

stood back from the high-road. At the same time the men who held me between them declared their intention of charging me with an assault. I was cool enough and wise enough now to make no opposition. "Drop your hold of my arms," I said, "and I will go with you to the town." The man in the gamekeeper's dress roughly refused. But the shorter man was sharp enough to look to consequences, and not to let his companion commit himself by unnecessary violence. He made a sign to the other, and I walked on between them with my arms free.

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

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

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

My indignation, I may almost say, my despair, at this mischievous check to all further progress--so base and trifling in itself, and yet so disheartening and so serious in its probable results--quite unfitted me at first to reflect on

the best means of extricating myself from the dilemma in which I now stood. I had the folly to call for writing materials, and to think of privately communicating my real position to the magistrate. The hopelessness and the imprudence of this proceeding failed to strike me before I had actually written the opening lines of the letter. It was not till I had pushed the paper away--not till, I am ashamed to say, I had almost allowed the vexation of my helpless position to conquer me--that a course of action suddenly occurred to my mind, which Sir Percival had probably not anticipated, and which might set me free again in a few hours. I determined to communicate the situation in which I was placed to Mr. Dawson, of Oak Lodge.

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

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

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

Mr. Dawson hospitably invited me to go back with him to Oak Lodge, and

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

Time was now of the last importance.

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

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

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

I parried the question as well as I could. It was impossible at this stage of the investigation to be too cautious, and it was just as well not to let Mr. Wansborough know prematurely that I had already examined the original register. I described myself, therefore, as pursuing a family inquiry, to the object of which every possible saving of time was of great importance. I was

anxious to send certain particulars to London by that day's post, and one look at the duplicate register (paying, of course, the necessary fees) might supply what I required, and save me a further journey to Old Welmingham. I added that, in the event of my subsequently requiring a copy of the original register, I should make application to Mr. Wansborough's office to furnish me with the document.

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

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

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

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

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

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

appeared at Old Welmingham. Here, at Knowlesbury, was the chance of committing the forgery shown to me in the copy, and there, at Old Welmingham, was the forgery committed in the register of the church.

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

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

The paltry means by which the fraud had been effected, the magnitude and daring of the crime that it represented, the horror of the consequences involved in its discovery, overwhelmed me. Who could wonder now at the brute-restlessness of the wretch's life--at his desperate alternations between abject duplicity and reckless violence--at the madness of guilty distrust which had made him imprison Anne Catherick in the Asylum, and had given him over to the vile conspiracy against his wife, on the bare suspicion that the one and the other knew his terrible secret? The disclosure of that secret might, in past years, have hanged him--might now transport him for life. The disclosure of that secret, even if the sufferers by his deception spared him the penalties of the law, would deprive him at one blow of the name, the rank, the estate, the whole social existence that he had usurped. This was the Secret, and it was mine! A word from me, and house, lands, baronetcy, were gone from him for ever--a word from me, and he was driven out into the world, a nameless, penniless, friendless outcast! The man's whole future hung on my lips--and he knew it by this time as certainly as I did!

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

I considered for a minute. My first necessity was to secure positive evidence in writing of the discovery that I had just made, and in the event of any personal misadventure happening to me, to place that evidence beyond Sir

Percival's reach. The copy of the register was sure to be safe in Mr. Wansborough's strong room. But the position of the original in the vestry was, as I had seen with my own eyes, anything but secure.

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

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

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

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

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

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

shoulder. I returned it heavily on his head. He staggered back and jostled his two companions just as they were both rushing at me. This circumstance gave me a moment's start. I slipped by them, and took to the middle of the road again at the top of my speed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How? When? Who can have taken them?"

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

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

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

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

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

"I beg your pardon, Sir Percival----" he began.

I stopped him before he could say more.

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

The man drew back directly.

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

"You expected to meet your master here?"

"I was told to wait in the lane."

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

"Who's that?" whispered the clerk. "Does he know anything about the keys?"

"We won't wait to ask him," I replied. "We will go on to the vestry first."

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

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

The clerk trembled and leaned against me heavily.

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

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

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

I hurried through the churchyard to the door.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Try the other door!" I shouted. "Try the door into the church! The lock's

hampered. You're a dead man if you waste another moment on it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The thought leaped through me like the fire leaping out of the shattered skylight. I appealed to the man who had spoken first of the fire-engine in the town. "Have you got your pickaxes handy?" Yes, they had. "And a hatchet, and a saw, and a bit of rope?" Yes! yes! yes! I ran down among the villagers, with the lantern in my hand. "Five shillings apiece to every man who helps me!" They started into life at the words. That ravenous second hunger of poverty--the hunger for money--roused them into tumult and activity in a moment. "Two of you for more lanterns, if you have them! Two of you for the pickaxes and the tools! The rest after me to find the beam!" They cheered--with shrill starveling voices they cheered. The women and the children fled back on either side. We rushed in a body down the churchyard path to the first empty cottage. Not a man was left behind but the clerk--the poor old clerk standing on the flat tombstone sobbing and wailing over the church. The servant was still at my heels--his white, helpless, panic-stricken face was close over my shoulder as we pushed into the cottage. There were rafters from the torn-down floor above, lying loose on the ground--but they were too light. A beam ran across over our heads, but not out of reach of our arms and our pickaxes--a beam fast at each end in the ruined wall, with ceiling and flooring all ripped away, and a great gap in the roof above, open to the sky. We attacked the beam at both ends at once. God! how it held--how the brick and mortar of the wall resisted us! We struck, and tugged, and tore. The beam gave at one end--it came down with a lump of brickwork after it. There was a scream from the women all huddled in the doorway to look at us--a shout from the men--two of them

down but not hurt. Another tug all together--and the beam was loose at both ends. We raised it, and gave the word to clear the doorway. Now for the work! now for the rush at the door! There is the fire streaming into the sky, streaming brighter than ever to light us! Steady along the churchyard path--steady with the beam for a rush at the door. One, two, three--and off. Out rings the cheering again, irrepressibly. We have shaken it already, the hinges must give if the lock won't. Another run with the beam! One, two, three--and off. It's loose! the stealthy fire darts at us through the crevice all round it. Another, and a last rush! The door falls in with a crash. A great hush of awe, a stillness of breathless expectation, possesses every living soul of us. We look for the body. The scorching heat on our faces drives us back: we see nothing--above, below, all through the room, we see nothing but a sheet of living fire.

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

"He's dust and ashes," said the clerk. "And the books are dust and ashes--and oh, sirs! the church will be dust and ashes soon."

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

Hark!

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

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

Save the church!

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

In ten minutes the engine was in position, the well at the back of the church was feeding it, and the hose was carried to the doorway of the vestry. If help had been wanted from me I could not have afforded it now. My energy of

will was gone--my strength was exhausted--the turmoil of my thoughts was fearfully and suddenly stilled, now I knew that he was dead.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"This way, sir, if you please," he said quietly.

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

"Do you know him, sir?"

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

"Can you identify him, sir?"

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

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

XI

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

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

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

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

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

The objects of the legal inquiry were necessarily beset by peculiar complications and difficulties. Besides the investigation into the manner in which the deceased had met his death, there were serious questions to be settled relating to the cause of the fire, to the abstraction of the keys, and to the presence of a stranger in the vestry at the time when the flames broke

out. Even the identification of the dead man had not yet been accomplished. The helpless condition of the servant had made the police distrustful of his asserted recognition of his master. They had sent to Knowlesbury overnight to secure the attendance of witnesses who were well acquainted with the personal appearance of Sir Percival Glyde, and they had communicated, the first thing in the morning, with Blackwater Park. These precautions enabled the coroner and jury to settle the question of identity, and to confirm the correctness of the servant's assertion; the evidence offered by competent witnesses, and by the discovery of certain facts, being subsequently strengthened by an examination of the dead man's watch. The crest and the name of Sir Percival Glyde were engraved inside it.

The next inquiries related to the fire.

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

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

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

and the jury, which I had already produced on the mind of Mr. Kyrle.

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

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

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

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

His first impulse, under these circumstances, was doubtless to try to extinguish the flames, and failing in that, his second impulse (ignorant as he was of the state of the lock) had been to attempt to escape by the door which had given him entrance. When I had called to him, the flames must have reached across the door leading into the church, on either side of which the presses extended, and close to which the other combustible

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

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

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

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

My own impression was, that he had been first used (without any guilty knowledge on his own part) to ascertain the fact of the clerk's absence from home on the previous day, and that he had been afterwards ordered to wait near the church (but out of sight of the vestry) to assist his master, in the event of my escaping the attack on the road, and of a collision occurring between Sir Percival and myself. It is necessary to add, that the man's own testimony was never obtained to confirm this view. The medical report of him declared that what little mental faculty he possessed was seriously shaken; nothing satisfactory was extracted from him at the adjourned inquest, and for aught I know to the contrary, he may never have recovered to this day.

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

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

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

What changes met me when I got there!

Through all the ways of our unintelligible world the trivial and the terrible walk hand in hand together. The irony of circumstances holds no mortal catastrophe in respect. When I reached the church, the trampled condition of the burial-ground was the only serious trace left to tell of the fire and the death. A rough hoarding of boards had been knocked up before the vestry doorway. Rude caricatures were scrawled on it already, and the village children were fighting and shouting for the possession of the best peep-hole to see through. On the spot where I had heard the cry for help from the burning room, on the spot where the panic-stricken servant had dropped on his knees, a fussy flock of poultry was now scrambling for the first choice of worms after the rain; and on the ground at my feet, where the door and its dreadful burden had been laid, a workman's dinner was waiting for him, tied up in a yellow basin, and his faithful cur in charge was yelping at me for coming near the food. The old clerk, looking idly at the slow commencement of the repairs, had only one interest that he could talk about now--the interest of escaping all blame for his own part on account of the accident that had happened. One of the village women, whose white

wild face I remembered the picture of terror when we pulled down the beam, was giggling with another woman, the picture of inanity, over an old washing-tub. There is nothing serious in mortality! Solomon in all his glory was Solomon with the elements of the contemptible lurking in every fold of his robes and in every corner of his palace.

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

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

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

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

On my way to the hotel I passed the end of the square in which Mrs. Catherick lived. Should I go back to the house, and make another attempt to see her. No. That news of Sir Percival's death, which was the last news she ever expected to hear, must have reached her hours since. All the proceedings at the inquest had been reported in the local paper that morning--there was nothing I could tell her which she did not know already. My interest in making her speak had slackened. I remembered the furtive hatred in her face when she said, "There is no news of Sir Percival that I don't expect--except the news of his death." I remembered the stealthy interest in her eyes when they settled on me at parting, after she had

spoken those words. Some instinct, deep in my heart, which I felt to be a true one, made the prospect of again entering her presence repulsive to me--I turned away from the square, and went straight back to the hotel.

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

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

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

THE STORY CONTINUED BY MRS. CATHERICK

SIR,--You have not come back, as you said you would. No matter--I know the news, and I write to tell you so. Did you see anything particular in my face when you left me? I was wondering, in my own mind, whether the day of his downfall had come at last, and whether you were the chosen instrument for working it. You were, and you HAVE worked it.

You were weak enough, as I have heard, to try and save his life. If you had succeeded, I should have looked upon you as my enemy. Now you have failed, I hold you as my friend. Your inquiries frightened him into the vestry by night--your inquiries, without your privity and against your will, have served the hatred and wreaked the vengeance of three-and-twenty years. Thank you, sir, in spite of yourself.

I owe something to the man who has done this. How can I pay my debt? If I was a young woman still I might say, "Come, put your arm round my waist, and kiss me, if you like." I should have been fond enough of you even to go that length, and you would have accepted my invitation--you would, sir, twenty years ago! But I am an old woman now. Well! I can satisfy your curiosity, and pay my debt in that way. You HAD a great curiosity to know certain private affairs of mine when you came to see me--private affairs which all your sharpness could not look into without my help--private affairs which you have not discovered, even now. You SHALL discover them--your curiosity shall be satisfied. I will take any trouble to please you, my estimable young friend!

You were a little boy, I suppose, in the year twenty-seven? I was a handsome young woman at that time, living at Old Welmingham. I had a contemptible fool for a husband. I had also the honour of being acquainted (never mind how) with a certain gentleman (never mind whom). I shall not call him by his name. Why should I? It was not his own. He never had a name: you know that, by this time, as well as I do.

It will be more to the purpose to tell you how he worked himself into my good graces. I was born with the tastes of a lady, and he gratified them--in other words, he admired me, and he made me presents. No woman can resist admiration and presents--especially presents, provided they happen to be just the thing she wants. He was sharp enough to know that--most men are. Naturally he wanted something in return--all men do. And what do you think was the something? The merest trifle. Nothing but the key of the

vestry, and the key of the press inside it, when my husband's back was turned. Of course he lied when I asked him why he wished me to get him the keys in that private way. He might have saved himself the trouble--I didn't believe him. But I liked my presents, and I wanted more. So I got him the keys, without my husband's knowledge, and I watched him, without his own knowledge. Once, twice, four times I watched him, and the fourth time I found him out.

I was never over-scrupulous where other people's affairs were concerned, and I was not over-scrupulous about his adding one to the marriages in the register on his own account.

Of course I knew it was wrong, but it did no harm to me, which was one good reason for not making a fuss about it. And I had not got a gold watch and chain, which was another, still better--and he had promised me one from London only the day before, which was a third, best of all. If I had known what the law considered the crime to be, and how the law punished it, I should have taken proper care of myself, and have exposed him then and there. But I knew nothing, and I longed for the gold watch. All the conditions I insisted on were that he should take me into his confidence and tell me everything. I was as curious about his affairs then as you are about mine now. He granted my conditions--why, you will see presently.

This, put in short, is what I heard from him. He did not willingly tell me all that I tell you here. I drew some of it from him by persuasion and some of it by questions. I was determined to have all the truth, and I believe I got it.

He knew no more than any one else of what the state of things really was between his father and mother till after his mother's death. Then his father confessed it, and promised to do what he could for his son. He died having done nothing--not having even made a will. The son (who can blame him?) wisely provided for himself. He came to England at once, and took possession of the property. There was no one to suspect him, and no one to say him nay. His father and mother had always lived as man and wife--none of the few people who were acquainted with them ever supposed them to be anything else. The right person to claim the property (if the truth had been known) was a distant relation, who had no idea of ever getting it, and who was away at sea when his father died. He had no difficulty so far--he took possession, as a matter of course. But he could not borrow money on the property as a matter of course. There were two things wanted of him before he could do this. One was a certificate of his birth, and the other was a certificate of his parents' marriage. The certificate of his birth was easily got--he was born abroad, and the certificate was there in due form. The

other matter was a difficulty, and that difficulty brought him to Old Welmingham.

But for one consideration he might have gone to Knowlesbury instead.

His mother had been living there just before she met with his father--living under her maiden name, the truth being that she was really a married woman, married in Ireland, where her husband had ill-used her, and had afterwards gone off with some other person. I give you this fact on good authority--Sir Felix mentioned it to his son as the reason why he had not married. You may wonder why the son, knowing that his parents had met each other at Knowlesbury, did not play his first tricks with the register of that church, where it might have been fairly presumed his father and mother were married. The reason was that the clergyman who did duty at Knowlesbury church, in the year eighteen hundred and three (when, according to his birth certificate, his father and mother OUGHT to have been married), was alive still when he took possession of the property in the New Year of eighteen hundred and twenty-seven. This awkward circumstance forced him to extend his inquiries to our neighbourhood. There no such danger existed, the former clergyman at our church having been dead for some years.

Old Welmingham suited his purpose as well as Knowlesbury. His father had removed his mother from Knowlesbury, and had lived with her at a cottage on the river, a little distance from our village. People who had known his solitary ways when he was single did not wonder at his solitary ways when he was supposed to be married. If he had not been a hideous creature to look at, his retired life with the lady might have raised suspicions; but, as things were, his hiding his ugliness and his deformity in the strictest privacy surprised nobody. He lived in our neighbourhood till he came in possession of the Park. After three or four and twenty years had passed, who was to say (the clergyman being dead) that his marriage had not been as private as the rest of his life, and that it had not taken place at Old Welmingham church?

So, as I told you, the son found our neighbourhood the surest place he could choose to set things right secretly in his own interests. It may surprise you to hear that what he really did to the marriage register was done on the spur of the moment--done on second thoughts.

His first notion was only to tear the leaf out (in the right year and month), to destroy it privately, to go back to London, and to tell the lawyers to get him the necessary certificate of his father's marriage, innocently referring them

of course to the date on the leaf that was gone. Nobody could say his father and mother had NOT been married after that, and whether, under the circumstances, they would stretch a point or not about lending him the money (he thought they would), he had his answer ready at all events, if a question was ever raised about his right to the name and the estate.

But when he came to look privately at the register for himself, he found at the bottom of one of the pages for the year eighteen hundred and three a blank space left, seemingly through there being no room to make a long entry there, which was made instead at the top of the next page. The sight of this chance altered all his plans. It was an opportunity he had never hoped for, or thought of--and he took it--you know how. The blank space, to have exactly tallied with his birth certificate, ought to have occurred in the July part of the register. It occurred in the September part instead. However, in this case, if suspicious questions were asked, the answer was not hard to find. He had only to describe himself as a seven months' child.

I was fool enough, when he told me his story, to feel some interest and some pity for him--which was just what he calculated on, as you will see. I thought him hardly used. It was not his fault that his father and mother were not married, and it was not his father's and mother's fault either. A more scrupulous woman than I was--a woman who had not set her heart on a gold watch and chain--would have found some excuses for him. At all events, I held my tongue, and helped to screen what he was about.

He was some time getting the ink the right colour (mixing it over and over again in pots and bottles of mine), and some time afterwards in practising the handwriting. But he succeeded in the end, and made an honest woman of his mother after she was dead in her grave! So far, I don't deny that he behaved honourably enough to myself. He gave me my watch and chain, and spared no expense in buying them; both were of superior workmanship, and very expensive. I have got them still--the watch goes beautifully.

You said the other day that Mrs. Clements had told you everything she knew. In that case there is no need for me to write about the trumpery scandal by which I was the sufferer--the innocent sufferer, I positively assert. You must know as well as I do what the notion was which my husband took into his head when he found me and my fine-gentleman acquaintance meeting each other privately and talking secrets together. But what you don't know is how it ended between that same gentleman and myself. You shall read and see how he behaved to me.

The first words I said to him, when I saw the turn things had taken, were,

"Do me justice--clear my character of a stain on it which you know I don't deserve. I don't want you to make a clean breast of it to my husband--only tell him, on your word of honour as a gentleman, that he is wrong, and that I am not to blame in the way he thinks I am. Do me that justice, at least, after all I have done for you." He flatly refused, in so many words. He told me plainly that it was his interest to let my husband and all my neighbours believe the falsehood--because, as long as they did so they were quite certain never to suspect the truth. I had a spirit of my own, and I told him they should know the truth from my lips. His reply was short, and to the point. If I spoke, I was a lost woman, as certainly as he was a lost man.

Yes! it had come to that. He had deceived me about the risk I ran in helping him. He had practised on my ignorance, he had tempted me with his gifts, he had interested me with his story--and the result of it was that he made me his accomplice. He owned this coolly, and he ended by telling me, for the first time, what the frightful punishment really was for his offence, and for any one who helped him to commit it. In those days the law was not so tender-hearted as I hear it is now. Murderers were not the only people liable to be hanged, and women convicts were not treated like ladies in undeserved distress. I confess he frightened me--the mean impostor! the cowardly blackguard! Do you understand now how I hated him? Do you understand why I am taking all this trouble--thankfully taking it--to gratify the curiosity of the meritorious young gentleman who hunted him down?

Well, to go on. He was hardly fool enough to drive me to downright desperation. I was not the sort of woman whom it was quite safe to hunt into a corner--he knew that, and wisely quieted me with proposals for the future.

I deserved some reward (he was kind enough to say) for the service I had done him, and some compensation (he was so obliging as to add) for what I had suffered. He was quite willing--generous scoundrel!--to make me a handsome yearly allowance, payable quarterly, on two conditions. First, I was to hold my tongue--in my own interests as well as in his. Secondly, I was not to stir away from Welmingham without first letting him know, and waiting till I had obtained his permission. In my own neighbourhood, no virtuous female friends would tempt me into dangerous gossiping at the tea-table. In my own neighbourhood, he would always know where to find me. A hard condition, that second one--but I accepted it.

What else was I to do? I was left helpless, with the prospect of a coming incumbrance in the shape of a child. What else was I to do? Cast myself on the mercy of my runaway idiot of a husband who had raised the scandal

against me? I would have died first. Besides, the allowance WAS a handsome one. I had a better income, a better house over my head, better carpets on my floors, than half the women who turned up the whites of their eyes at the sight of me. The dress of Virtue, in our parts, was cotton print. I had silk.

So I accepted the conditions he offered me, and made the best of them, and fought my battle with my respectable neighbours on their own ground, and won it in course of time--as you saw yourself. How I kept his Secret (and mine) through all the years that have passed from that time to this, and whether my late daughter, Anne, ever really crept into my confidence, and got the keeping of the Secret too--are questions, I dare say, to which you are curious to find an answer. Well! my gratitude refuses you nothing. I will turn to a fresh page and give you the answer immediately. But you must excuse one thing--you must excuse my beginning, Mr. Hartright, with an expression of surprise at the interest which you appear to have felt in my late daughter. It is quite unaccountable to me. If that interest makes you anxious for any particulars of her early life, I must refer you to Mrs. Clements, who knows more of the subject than I do. Pray understand that I do not profess to have been at all overfond of my late daughter. She was a worry to me from first to last, with the additional disadvantage of being always weak in the head. You like candour, and I hope this satisfies you.

There is no need to trouble you with many personal particulars relating to those past times. It will be enough to say that I observed the terms of the bargain on my side, and that I enjoyed my comfortable income in return, paid quarterly.

Now and then I got away and changed the scene for a short time, always asking leave of my lord and master first, and generally getting it. He was not, as I have already told you, fool enough to drive me too hard, and he could reasonably rely on my holding my tongue for my own sake, if not for his. One of my longest trips away from home was the trip I took to Limmeridge to nurse a half-sister there, who was dying. She was reported to have saved money, and I thought it as well (in case any accident happened to stop my allowance) to look after my own interests in that direction. As things turned out, however, my pains were all thrown away, and I got nothing, because nothing was to be had.

I had taken Anne to the north with me, having my whims and fancies, occasionally, about my child, and getting, at such times, jealous of Mrs. Clements' influence over her. I never liked Mrs. Clements. She was a poor, empty-headed, spiritless woman--what you call a born drudge--and I was

now and then not averse to plaguing her by taking Anne away. Not knowing what else to do with my girl while I was nursing in Cumberland, I put her to school at Limmeridge. The lady of the manor, Mrs. Fairlie (a remarkably plain-looking woman, who had entrapped one of the handsomest men in England into marrying her), amused me wonderfully by taking a violent fancy to my girl. The consequence was, she learnt nothing at school, and was petted and spoilt at Limmeridge House. Among other whims and fancies which they taught her there, they put some nonsense into her head about always wearing white. Hating white and liking colours myself, I determined to take the nonsense out of her head as soon as we got home again.

Strange to say, my daughter resolutely resisted me. When she HAD got a notion once fixed in her mind she was, like other half-witted people, as obstinate as a mule in keeping it. We quarrelled finely, and Mrs. Clements, not liking to see it, I suppose, offered to take Anne away to live in London with her. I should have said Yes, if Mrs. Clements had not sided with my daughter about her dressing herself in white. But being determined she should NOT dress herself in white, and disliking Mrs. Clements more than ever for taking part against me, I said No, and meant No, and stuck to No. The consequence was, my daughter remained with me, and the consequence of that, in its turn, was the first serious quarrel that happened about the Secret.

The circumstance took place long after the time I have just been writing of. I had been settled for years in the new town, and was steadily living down my bad character and slowly gaining ground among the respectable inhabitants. It helped me forward greatly towards this object to have my daughter with me. Her harmlessness and her fancy for dressing in white excited a certain amount of sympathy. I left off opposing her favourite whim on that account, because some of the sympathy was sure, in course of time, to fall to my share. Some of it did fall. I date my getting a choice of the two best sittings to let in the church from that time, and I date the clergyman's first bow from my getting the sittings.

Well, being settled in this way, I received a letter one morning from that highly born gentleman (now deceased) in answer to one of mine, warning him, according to agreement, of my wishing to leave the town for a little change of air and scene.

The ruffianly side of him must have been uppermost, I suppose, when he got my letter, for he wrote back, refusing me in such abominably insolent language, that I lost all command over myself, and abused him, in my

daughter's presence, as "a low impostor whom I could ruin for life if I chose to open my lips and let out his Secret." I said no more about him than that, being brought to my senses as soon as those words had escaped me by the sight of my daughter's face looking eagerly and curiously at mine. I instantly ordered her out of the room until I had composed myself again.

My sensations were not pleasant, I can tell you, when I came to reflect on my own folly. Anne had been more than usually crazy and queer that year, and when I thought of the chance there might be of her repeating my words in the town, and mentioning HIS name in connection with them, if inquisitive people got hold of her, I was finely terrified at the possible consequences. My worst fears for myself, my worst dread of what he might do, led me no farther than this. I was quite unprepared for what really did happen only the next day.

On that next day, without any warning to me to expect him, he came to the house.

His first words, and the tone in which he spoke them, surly as it was, showed me plainly enough that he had repented already of his insolent answer to my application, and that he had come in a mighty bad temper to try and set matters right again before it was too late. Seeing my daughter in the room with me (I had been afraid to let her out of my sight after what had happened the day before) he ordered her away. They neither of them liked each other, and he vented the ill-temper on HER which he was afraid to show to ME.

"Leave us," he said, looking at her over his shoulder. She looked back over HER shoulder and waited as if she didn't care to go. "Do you hear?" he roared out, "leave the room." "Speak to me civilly," says she, getting red in the face. "Turn the idiot out," says he, looking my way. She had always had crazy notions of her own about her dignity, and that word "idiot" upset her in a moment. Before I could interfere she stepped up to him in a fine passion. "Beg my pardon, directly," says she, "or I'll make it the worse for you. I'll let out your Secret. I can ruin you for life if I choose to open my lips." My own words!--repeated exactly from what I had said the day before--repeated, in his presence, as if they had come from herself. He sat speechless, as white as the paper I am writing on, while I pushed her out of the room. When he recovered himself----

No! I am too respectable a woman to mention what he said when he recovered himself. My pen is the pen of a member of the rector's congregation, and a subscriber to the "Wednesday Lectures on Justification

by Faith"--how can you expect me to employ it in writing bad language? Suppose, for yourself, the raging, swearing frenzy of the lowest ruffian in England, and let us get on together, as fast as may be, to the way in which it all ended.

It ended, as you probably guess by this time, in his insisting on securing his own safety by shutting her up.

I tried to set things right. I told him that she had merely repeated, like a parrot, the words she had heard me say and that she knew no particulars whatever, because I had mentioned none. I explained that she had affected, out of crazy spite against him, to know what she really did NOT know--that she only wanted to threaten him and aggravate him for speaking to her as he had just spoken--and that my unlucky words gave her just the chance of doing mischief of which she was in search. I referred him to other queer ways of hers, and to his own experience of the vagaries of half-witted people--it was all to no purpose--he would not believe me on my oath--he was absolutely certain I had betrayed the whole Secret. In short, he would hear of nothing but shutting her up.

Under these circumstances, I did my duty as a mother. "No pauper Asylum," I said, "I won't have her put in a pauper Asylum. A Private Establishment, if you please. I have my feelings as a mother, and my character to preserve in the town, and I will submit to nothing but a Private Establishment, of the sort which my genteel neighbours would choose for afflicted relatives of their own." Those were my words. It is gratifying to me to reflect that I did my duty. Though never overfond of my late daughter, I had a proper pride about her. No pauper stain--thanks to my firmness and resolution--ever rested on MY child.

Having carried my point (which I did the more easily, in consequence of the facilities offered by private Asylums), I could not refuse to admit that there were certain advantages gained by shutting her up. In the first place, she was taken excellent care of--being treated (as I took care to mention in the town) on the footing of a lady. In the second place, she was kept away from Welmingham, where she might have set people suspecting and inquiring, by repeating my own incautious words.

The only drawback of putting her under restraint was a very slight one. We merely turned her empty boast about knowing the Secret into a fixed delusion. Having first spoken in sheer crazy spitefulness against the man who had offended her, she was cunning enough to see that she had seriously frightened him, and sharp enough afterwards to discover that HE

was concerned in shutting her up. The consequence was she flamed out into a perfect frenzy of passion against him, going to the Asylum, and the first words she said to the nurses, after they had quieted her, were, that she was put in confinement for knowing his Secret, and that she meant to open her lips and ruin him, when the right time came.

She may have said the same thing to you, when you thoughtlessly assisted her escape. She certainly said it (as I heard last summer) to the unfortunate woman who married our sweet-tempered, nameless gentleman lately deceased. If either you, or that unlucky lady, had questioned my daughter closely, and had insisted on her explaining what she really meant, you would have found her lose all her self-importance suddenly, and get vacant, and restless, and confused--you would have discovered that I am writing nothing here but the plain truth. She knew that there was a Secret--she knew who was connected with it--she knew who would suffer by its being known--and beyond that, whatever airs of importance she may have given herself, whatever crazy boasting she may have indulged in with strangers, she never to her dying day knew more.

Have I satisfied your curiosity? I have taken pains enough to satisfy it at any rate. There is really nothing else I have to tell you about myself or my daughter. My worst responsibilities, so far as she was concerned, were all over when she was secured in the Asylum. I had a form of letter relating to the circumstances under which she was shut up, given me to write, in answer to one Miss Halcombe, who was curious in the matter, and who must have heard plenty of lies about me from a certain tongue well accustomed to the telling of the same. And I did what I could afterwards to trace my runaway daughter, and prevent her from doing mischief by making inquiries myself in the neighbourhood where she was falsely reported to have been seen. But these, and other trifles like them, are of little or no interest to you after what you have heard already.

So far, I have written in the friendliest possible spirit. But I cannot close this letter without adding a word here of serious remonstrance and reproof, addressed to yourself.

In the course of your personal interview with me, you audaciously referred to my late daughter's parentage on the father's side, as if that parentage was a matter of doubt. This was highly improper and very ungentlemanlike on your part! If we see each other again, remember, if you please, that I will allow no liberties to be taken with my reputation, and that the moral atmosphere of Welmingham (to use a favourite expression of my friend the rector's) must not be tainted by loose conversation of any kind. If you allow

yourself to doubt that my husband was Anne's father, you personally insult me in the grossest manner. If you have felt, and if you still continue to feel, an unhallowed curiosity on this subject, I recommend you, in your own interests, to check it at once, and for ever. On this side of the grave, Mr. Hartright, whatever may happen on the other, THAT curiosity will never be gratified.

Perhaps, after what I have just said, you will see the necessity of writing me an apology. Do so, and I will willingly receive it. I will, afterwards, if your wishes point to a second interview with me, go a step farther, and receive you. My circumstances only enable me to invite you to tea--not that they are at all altered for the worse by what has happened. I have always lived, as I think I told you, well within my income, and I have saved enough, in the last twenty years, to make me quite comfortable for the rest of my life. It is not my intention to leave Welmingham. There are one or two little advantages which I have still to gain in the town. The clergyman bows to me--as you saw. He is married, and his wife is not quite so civil. I propose to join the Dorcas Society, and I mean to make the clergyman's wife bow to me next.

If you favour me with your company, pray understand that the conversation must be entirely on general subjects. Any attempted reference to this letter will be quite useless--I am determined not to acknowledge having written it. The evidence has been destroyed in the fire, I know, but I think it desirable to err on the side of caution, nevertheless.

On this account no names are mentioned here, nor is any signature attached to these lines: the handwriting is disguised throughout, and I mean to deliver the letter myself, under circumstances which will prevent all fear of its being traced to my house. You can have no possible cause to complain of these precautions, seeing that they do not affect the information I here communicate, in consideration of the special indulgence which you have deserved at my hands. My hour for tea is half-past five, and my buttered toast waits for nobody.