

THE STORY CONCLUDED BY WALTER HARTRIGHT

I

When I closed the last leaf of the Count's manuscript the half-hour during which I had engaged to remain at Forest Road had expired. Monsieur Rubelle looked at his watch and bowed. I rose immediately, and left the agent in possession of the empty house. I never saw him again--I never heard more of him or of his wife. Out of the dark byways of villainy and deceit they had crawled across our path--into the same byways they crawled back secretly and were lost.

In a quarter of an hour after leaving Forest Road I was at home again.

But few words sufficed to tell Laura and Marian how my desperate venture had ended, and what the next event in our lives was likely to be. I left all details to be described later in the day, and hastened back to St. John's Wood, to see the person of whom Count Fosco had ordered the fly, when he went to meet Laura at the station.

The address in my possession led me to some "livery stables," about a quarter of a mile distant from Forest Road. The proprietor proved to be a civil and respectable man. When I explained that an important family matter obliged me to ask him to refer to his books for the purpose of ascertaining a date with which the record of his business transactions might supply me, he offered no objection to granting my request. The book was produced, and there, under the date of "July 26th, 1850," the order was entered in these words--

"Brougham to Count Fosco, 5 Forest Road. Two o'clock. (John Owen)."

I found on inquiry that the name of "John Owen," attached to the entry, referred to the man who had been employed to drive the fly. He was then at work in the stable-yard, and was sent for to see me at my request.

"Do you remember driving a gentleman, in the month of July last, from Number Five Forest Road to the Waterloo Bridge station?" I asked.

"Well, sir," said the man, "I can't exactly say I do."

"Perhaps you remember the gentleman himself? Can you call to mind driving a foreigner last summer--a tall gentleman and remarkably fat?" The man's face brightened directly.

"I remember him, sir! The fattest gentleman as ever I see, and the heaviest customer as ever I drove. Yes, yes--I call him to mind, sir! We DID go to the station, and it WAS from Forest Road. There was a parrot, or summat like it, screeching in the window. The gentleman was in a mortal hurry about the lady's luggage, and he gave me a handsome present for looking sharp and getting the boxes."

Getting the boxes! I recollected immediately that Laura's own account of herself on her arrival in London described her luggage as being collected for her by some person whom Count Fosco brought with him to the station. This was the man.

"Did you see the lady?" I asked. "What did she look like? Was she young or old?"

"Well, sir, what with the hurry and the crowd of people pushing about, I can't rightly say what the lady looked like. I can't call nothing to mind about her that I know of excepting her name."

"You remember her name?"

"Yes, sir. Her name was Lady Glyde."

"How do you come to remember that, when you have forgotten what she looked like?"

The man smiled, and shifted his feet in some little embarrassment.

"Why, to tell you the truth, sir," he said, "I hadn't been long married at that time, and my wife's name, before she changed it for mine, was the same as the lady's--meaning the name of Glyde, sir. The lady mentioned it herself. 'Is your name on your boxes, ma'am?' says I. 'Yes,' says she, 'my name is on my luggage--it is Lady Glyde.' 'Come!' I says to myself, 'I've a bad head for gentlefolks' names in general--but THIS one comes like an old friend, at any rate.' I can't say nothing about the time, sir, it might be nigh on a year ago, or it mightn't. But I can swear to the stout gentleman, and swear to the lady's name."

There was no need that he should remember the time--the date was positively established by his master's order-book. I felt at once that the means were now in my power of striking down the whole conspiracy at a blow with the irresistible weapon of plain fact. Without a moment's hesitation, I took the proprietor of the livery stables aside and told him what the real importance was of the evidence of his order-book and the evidence of his driver. An arrangement to compensate him for the temporary loss of the man's services was easily made, and a copy of the entry in the book was taken by myself, and certified as true by the master's own signature. I left the livery stables, having settled that John Owen was to hold himself at my disposal for the next three days, or for a longer period if necessity required it.

I now had in my possession all the papers that I wanted--the district registrar's own copy of the certificate of death, and Sir Percival's dated letter to the Count, being safe in my pocket-book.

With this written evidence about me, and with the coachman's answers fresh in my memory, I next turned my steps, for the first time since the beginning of all my inquiries, in the direction of Mr. Kyrle's office. One of my objects in paying him this second visit was, necessarily, to tell him what I had done. The other was to warn him of my resolution to take my wife to Limmeridge the next morning, and to have her publicly received and recognised in her uncle's house. I left it to Mr. Kyrle to decide under these circumstances, and in Mr. Gilmore's absence, whether he was or was not bound, as the family solicitor, to be present on that occasion in the family interests.

I will say nothing of Mr. Kyrle's amazement, or of the terms in which he expressed his opinion of my conduct from the first stage of the investigation to the last. It is only necessary to mention that he at once decided on accompanying us to Cumberland.

We started the next morning by the early train. Laura, Marian, Mr. Kyrle, and myself in one carriage, and John Owen, with a clerk from Mr. Kyrle's office, occupying places in another. On reaching the Limmeridge station we went first to the farmhouse at Todd's Corner. It was my firm determination that Laura should not enter her uncle's house till she appeared there publicly recognised as his niece. I left Marian to settle the question of accommodation with Mrs. Todd, as soon as the good woman had recovered from the bewilderment of hearing what our errand was in Cumberland, and I arranged with her husband that John Owen was to be committed to the ready hospitality of the farm-servants. These preliminaries completed, Mr.

Kyrle and I set forth together for Limmeridge House.

I cannot write at any length of our interview with Mr. Fairlie, for I cannot recall it to mind without feelings of impatience and contempt, which make the scene, even in remembrance only, utterly repulsive to me. I prefer to record simply that I carried my point. Mr. Fairlie attempted to treat us on his customary plan. We passed without notice his polite insolence at the outset of the interview. We heard without sympathy the protestations with which he tried next to persuade us that the disclosure of the conspiracy had overwhelmed him. He absolutely whined and whimpered at last like a fretful child. "How was he to know that his niece was alive when he was told that she was dead? He would welcome dear Laura with pleasure, if we would only allow him time to recover. Did we think he looked as if he wanted hurrying into his grave? No. Then, why hurry him?" He reiterated these remonstrances at every available opportunity, until I checked them once for all, by placing him firmly between two inevitable alternatives. I gave him his choice between doing his niece justice on my terms, or facing the consequence of a public assertion of her existence in a court of law. Mr. Kyrle, to whom he turned for help, told him plainly that he must decide the question then and there. Characteristically choosing the alternative which promised soonest to release him from all personal anxiety, he announced with a sudden outburst of energy, that he was not strong enough to bear any more bullying, and that we might do as we pleased.

Mr. Kyrle and I at once went downstairs, and agreed upon a form of letter which was to be sent round to the tenants who had attended the false funeral, summoning them, in Mr. Fairlie's name, to assemble in Limmeridge House on the next day but one. An order referring to the same date was also written, directing a statuary in Carlisle to send a man to Limmeridge churchyard for the purpose of erasing an inscription--Mr. Kyrle, who had arranged to sleep in the house, undertaking that Mr. Fairlie should hear these letters read to him, and should sign them with his own hand.

I occupied the interval day at the farm in writing a plain narrative of the conspiracy, and in adding to it a statement of the practical contradiction which facts offered to the assertion of Laura's death. This I submitted to Mr. Kyrle before I read it the next day to the assembled tenants. We also arranged the form in which the evidence should be presented at the close of the reading. After these matters were settled, Mr. Kyrle endeavoured to turn the conversation next to Laura's affairs. Knowing, and desiring to know nothing of those affairs, and doubting whether he would approve, as a man of business, of my conduct in relation to my wife's life-interest in the legacy left to Madame Fosco, I begged Mr. Kyrle to excuse me if I abstained from

discussing the subject. It was connected, as I could truly tell him, with those sorrows and troubles of the past which we never referred to among ourselves, and which we instinctively shrank from discussing with others.

My last labour, as the evening approached, was to obtain "The Narrative of the Tombstone," by taking a copy of the false inscription on the grave before it was erased.

The day came--the day when Laura once more entered the familiar breakfast-room at Limmeridge House. All the persons assembled rose from their seats as Marian and I led her in. A perceptible shock of surprise, an audible murmur of interest ran through them, at the sight of her face. Mr. Fairlie was present (by my express stipulation), with Mr. Kyrle by his side. His valet stood behind him with a smelling-bottle ready in one hand, and a white handkerchief, saturated with eau-de-Cologne, in the other.

I opened the proceedings by publicly appealing to Mr. Fairlie to say whether I appeared there with his authority and under his express sanction. He extended an arm, on either side, to Mr. Kyrle and to his valet--was by them assisted to stand on his legs, and then expressed himself in these terms: "Allow me to present Mr. Hartright. I am as great an invalid as ever, and he is so very obliging as to speak for me. The subject is dreadfully embarrassing. Please hear him, and don't make a noise!" With those words he slowly sank back again into the chair, and took refuge in his scented pocket-handkerchief.

The disclosure of the conspiracy followed, after I had offered my preliminary explanation, first of all, in the fewest and the plainest words. I was there present (I informed my hearers) to declare, first, that my wife, then sitting by me, was the daughter of the late Mr. Philip Fairlie; secondly, to prove by positive facts, that the funeral which they had attended in Limmeridge churchyard was the funeral of another woman; thirdly, to give them a plain account of how it had all happened. Without further preface, I at once read the narrative of the conspiracy, describing it in clear outline, and dwelling only upon the pecuniary motive for it, in order to avoid complicating my statement by unnecessary reference to Sir Percival's secret. This done, I reminded my audience of the date on the inscription in the churchyard (the 25th), and confirmed its correctness by producing the certificate of death. I then read them Sir Percival's letter of the 25th, announcing his wife's intended journey from Hampshire to London on the 26th. I next showed that she had taken that journey, by the personal testimony of the driver of the fly, and I proved that she had performed it on the appointed day, by the order-book at the livery stables. Marian then added her own statement of

the meeting between Laura and herself at the mad-house, and of her sister's escape. After which I closed the proceedings by informing the persons present of Sir Percival's death and of my marriage.

Mr. Kyrle rose when I resumed my seat, and declared, as the legal adviser of the family, that my case was proved by the plainest evidence he had ever heard in his life. As he spoke those words, I put my arm round Laura, and raised her so that she was plainly visible to every one in the room. "Are you all of the same opinion?" I asked, advancing towards them a few steps, and pointing to my wife.

The effect of the question was electrical. Far down at the lower end of the room one of the oldest tenants on the estate started to his feet, and led the rest with him in an instant. I see the man now, with his honest brown face and his iron-grey hair, mounted on the window-seat, waving his heavy riding-whip over his head, and leading the cheers. "There she is, alive and hearty--God bless her! Gi' it tongue, lads! Gi' it tongue!" The shout that answered him, reiterated again and again, was the sweetest music I ever heard. The labourers in the village and the boys from the school, assembled on the lawn, caught up the cheering and echoed it back on us. The farmers' wives clustered round Laura, and struggled which should be first to shake hands with her, and to implore her, with the tears pouring over their own cheeks, to bear up bravely and not to cry. She was so completely overwhelmed, that I was obliged to take her from them, and carry her to the door. There I gave her into Marian's care--Marian, who had never failed us yet, whose courageous self-control did not fail us now. Left by myself at the door, I invited all the persons present (after thanking them in Laura's name and mine) to follow me to the churchyard, and see the false inscription struck off the tombstone with their own eyes.

They all left the house, and all joined the throng of villagers collected round the grave, where the statuary's man was waiting for us. In a breathless silence, the first sharp stroke of the steel sounded on the marble. Not a voice was heard--not a soul moved, till those three words, "Laura, Lady Glyde," had vanished from sight. Then there was a great heave of relief among the crowd, as if they felt that the last fetters of the conspiracy had been struck off Laura herself, and the assembly slowly withdrew. It was late in the day before the whole inscription was erased. One line only was afterwards engraved in its place: "Anne Catherick, July 25th, 1850."

I returned to Limmeridge House early enough in the evening to take leave of Mr. Kyrle. He and his clerk, and the driver of the fly, went back to London by the night train. On their departure an insolent message was delivered to

me from Mr. Fairlie--who had been carried from the room in a shattered condition, when the first outbreak of cheering answered my appeal to the tenantry. The message conveyed to us "Mr. Fairlie's best congratulations," and requested to know whether "we contemplated stopping in the house." I sent back word that the only object for which we had entered his doors was accomplished--that I contemplated stopping in no man's house but my own--and that Mr. Fairlie need not entertain the slightest apprehension of ever seeing us or hearing from us again. We went back to our friends at the farm to rest that night, and the next morning--escorted to the station, with the heartiest enthusiasm and good will, by the whole village and by all the farmers in the neighbourhood--we returned to London.

As our view of the Cumberland hills faded in the distance, I thought of the first disheartening circumstances under which the long struggle that was now past and over had been pursued. It was strange to look back and to see, now, that the poverty which had denied us all hope of assistance had been the indirect means of our success, by forcing me to act for myself. If we had been rich enough to find legal help, what would have been the result? The gain (on Mr. Kyrle's own showing) would have been more than doubtful--the loss, judging by the plain test of events as they had really happened, certain. The law would never have obtained me my interview with Mrs. Catherick. The law would never have made Pesca the means of forcing a confession from the Count.

II

Two more events remain to be added to the chain before it reaches fairly from the outset of the story to the close.

While our new sense of freedom from the long oppression of the past was still strange to us, I was sent for by the friend who had given me my first employment in wood engraving, to receive from him a fresh testimony of his regard for my welfare. He had been commissioned by his employers to go to Paris, and to examine for them a fresh discovery in the practical application of his Art, the merits of which they were anxious to ascertain. His own engagements had not allowed him leisure time to undertake the errand, and he had most kindly suggested that it should be transferred to me. I could have no hesitation in thankfully accepting the offer, for if I acquitted myself of my commission as I hoped I should, the result would be a permanent engagement on the illustrated newspaper, to which I was now only occasionally attached.

I received my instructions and packed up for the journey the next day. On leaving Laura once more (under what changed circumstances!) in her sister's care, a serious consideration recurred to me, which had more than once crossed my wife's mind, as well as my own, already--I mean the consideration of Marian's future. Had we any right to let our selfish affection accept the devotion of all that generous life? Was it not our duty, our best expression of gratitude, to forget ourselves, and to think only of HER? I tried to say this when we were alone for a moment, before I went away. She took my hand, and silenced me at the first words.

"After all that we three have suffered together," she said "there can be no parting between us till the last parting of all. My heart and my happiness, Walter, are with Laura and you. Wait a little till there are children's voices at your fireside. I will teach them to speak for me in THEIR language, and the first lesson they say to their father and mother shall be--We can't spare our aunt!"

My journey to Paris was not undertaken alone. At the eleventh hour Pesca decided that he would accompany me. He had not recovered his customary cheerfulness since the night at the Opera, and he determined to try what a week's holiday would do to raise his spirits.

I performed the errand entrusted to me, and drew out the necessary report,

on the fourth day from our arrival in Paris. The fifth day I arranged to devote to sight-seeing and amusements in Pesca's company.

Our hotel had been too full to accommodate us both on the same floor. My room was on the second story, and Pesca's was above me, on the third. On the morning of the fifth day I went upstairs to see if the Professor was ready to go out. Just before I reached the landing I saw his door opened from the inside--a long, delicate, nervous hand (not my friend's hand certainly) held it ajar. At the same time I heard Pesca's voice saying eagerly, in low tones, and in his own language--"I remember the name, but I don't know the man. You saw at the Opera he was so changed that I could not recognise him. I will forward the report--I can do no more." "No more need be done," answered the second voice. The door opened wide, and the light-haired man with the scar on his cheek--the man I had seen following Count Fosco's cab a week before--came out. He bowed as I drew aside to let him pass--his face was fearfully pale--and he held fast by the banisters as he descended the stairs.

I pushed open the door and entered Pesca's room. He was crouched up, in the strangest manner, in a corner of the sofa. He seemed to shrink from me when I approached him.

"Am I disturbing you?" I asked. "I did not know you had a friend with you till I saw him come out."

"No friend," said Pesca eagerly. "I see him to-day for the first time and the last."

"I am afraid he has brought you bad news?"

"Horrible news, Walter! Let us go back to London--I don't want to stop here--I am sorry I ever came. The misfortunes of my youth are very hard upon me," he said, turning his face to the wall, "very hard upon me in my later time. I try to forget them--and they will not forget ME!"

"We can't return, I am afraid, before the afternoon," I replied. "Would you like to come out with me in the meantime?"

"No, my friend, I will wait here. But let us go back to-day--pray let us go back."

I left him with the assurance that he should leave Paris that afternoon. We had arranged the evening before to ascend the Cathedral of Notre Dame,

with Victor Hugo's noble romance for our guide. There was nothing in the French capital that I was more anxious to see, and I departed by myself for the church.

Approaching Notre Dame by the river-side, I passed on my way the terrible dead-house of Paris--the Morgue. A great crowd clamoured and heaved round the door. There was evidently something inside which excited the popular curiosity, and fed the popular appetite for horror.

I should have walked on to the church if the conversation of two men and a woman on the outskirts of the crowd had not caught my ear. They had just come out from seeing the sight in the Morgue, and the account they were giving of the dead body to their neighbours described it as the corpse of a man--a man of immense size, with a strange mark on his left arm.

The moment those words reached me I stopped and took my place with the crowd going in. Some dim foreshadowing of the truth had crossed my mind when I heard Pesca's voice through the open door, and when I saw the stranger's face as he passed me on the stairs of the hotel. Now the truth itself was revealed to me--revealed in the chance words that had just reached my ears. Other vengeance than mine had followed that fated man from the theatre to his own door--from his own door to his refuge in Paris. Other vengeance than mine had called him to the day of reckoning, and had exacted from him the penalty of his life. The moment when I had pointed him out to Pesca at the theatre in the hearing of that stranger by our side, who was looking for him too--was the moment that sealed his doom. I remembered the struggle in my own heart, when he and I stood face to face--the struggle before I could let him escape me--and shuddered as I recalled it.

Slowly, inch by inch, I pressed in with the crowd, moving nearer and nearer to the great glass screen that parts the dead from the living at the Morgue--nearer and nearer, till I was close behind the front row of spectators, and could look in.

There he lay, unowned, unknown, exposed to the flippant curiosity of a French mob! There was the dreadful end of that long life of degraded ability and heartless crime! Hushed in the sublime repose of death, the broad, firm, massive face and head fronted us so grandly that the chattering Frenchwomen about me lifted their hands in admiration, and cried in shrill chorus, "Ah, what a handsome man!" The wound that had killed him had been struck with a knife or dagger exactly over his heart. No other traces of violence appeared about the body except on the left arm, and there, exactly

in the place where I had seen the brand on Pesca's arm, were two deep cuts in the shape of the letter T, which entirely obliterated the mark of the Brotherhood. His clothes, hung above him, showed that he had been himself conscious of his danger--they were clothes that had disguised him as a French artisan. For a few moments, but not for longer, I forced myself to see these things through the glass screen. I can write of them at no greater length, for I saw no more.

The few facts in connection with his death which I subsequently ascertained (partly from Pesca and partly from other sources), may be stated here before the subject is dismissed from these pages.

His body was taken out of the Seine in the disguise which I have described, nothing being found on him which revealed his name, his rank, or his place of abode. The hand that struck him was never traced, and the circumstances under which he was killed were never discovered. I leave others to draw their own conclusions in reference to the secret of the assassination as I have drawn mine. When I have intimated that the foreigner with the scar was a member of the Brotherhood (admitted in Italy after Pesca's departure from his native country), and when I have further added that the two cuts, in the form of a T, on the left arm of the dead man, signified the Italian word "Traditore," and showed that justice had been done by the Brotherhood on a traitor, I have contributed all that I know towards elucidating the mystery of Count Fosco's death.

The body was identified the day after I had seen it by means of an anonymous letter addressed to his wife. He was buried by Madame Fosco in the cemetery of Pere la Chaise. Fresh funeral wreaths continue to this day to be hung on the ornamental bronze railings round the tomb by the Countess's own hand. She lives in the strictest retirement at Versailles. Not long since she published a biography of her deceased husband. The work throws no light whatever on the name that was really his own or on the secret history of his life--it is almost entirely devoted to the praise of his domestic virtues, the assertion of his rare abilities, and the enumeration of the honours conferred on him. The circumstances attending his death are very briefly noticed, and are summed up on the last page in this sentence--"His life was one long assertion of the rights of the aristocracy and the sacred principles of Order, and he died a martyr to his cause."

III

The summer and autumn passed after my return from Paris, and brought no changes with them which need be noticed here. We lived so simply and quietly that the income which I was now steadily earning sufficed for all our wants.

In the February of the new year our first child was born--a son. My mother and sister and Mrs. Vesey were our guests at the little christening party, and Mrs. Clements was present to assist my wife on the same occasion. Marian was our boy's godmother, and Pesca and Mr. Gilmore (the latter acting by proxy) were his godfathers. I may add here that when Mr. Gilmore returned to us a year later he assisted the design of these pages, at my request, by writing the Narrative which appears early in the story under his name, and which, though first in order of precedence, was thus, in order of time, the last that I received.

The only event in our lives which now remains to be recorded, occurred when our little Walter was six months old.

At that time I was sent to Ireland to make sketches for certain forthcoming illustrations in the newspaper to which I was attached. I was away for nearly a fortnight, corresponding regularly with my wife and Marian, except during the last three days of my absence, when my movements were too uncertain to enable me to receive letters. I performed the latter part of my journey back at night, and when I reached home in the morning, to my utter astonishment there was no one to receive me. Laura and Marian and the child had left the house on the day before my return.

A note from my wife, which was given to me by the servant, only increased my surprise, by informing me that they had gone to Limmeridge House. Marian had prohibited any attempt at written explanations--I was entreated to follow them the moment I came back--complete enlightenment awaited me on my arrival in Cumberland--and I was forbidden to feel the slightest anxiety in the meantime. There the note ended. It was still early enough to catch the morning train. I reached Limmeridge House the same afternoon.

My wife and Marian were both upstairs. They had established themselves (by way of completing my amazement) in the little room which had been once assigned to me for a studio, when I was employed on Mr. Fairlie's drawings. On the very chair which I used to occupy when I was at work

Marian was sitting now, with the child industriously sucking his coral upon her lap--while Laura was standing by the well-remembered drawing-table which I had so often used, with the little album that I had filled for her in past times open under her hand.

"What in the name of heaven has brought you here?" I asked. "Does Mr. Fairlie know----?"

Marian suspended the question on my lips by telling me that Mr. Fairlie was dead. He had been struck by paralysis, and had never rallied after the shock. Mr. Kyrle had informed them of his death, and had advised them to proceed immediately to Limmeridge House.

Some dim perception of a great change dawned on my mind. Laura spoke before I had quite realised it. She stole close to me to enjoy the surprise which was still expressed in my face.

"My darling Walter," she said, "must we really account for our boldness in coming here? I am afraid, love, I can only explain it by breaking through our rule, and referring to the past."

"There is not the least necessity for doing anything of the kind," said Marian. "We can be just as explicit, and much more interesting, by referring to the future." She rose and held up the child kicking and crowing in her arms. "Do you know who this is, Walter?" she asked, with bright tears of happiness gathering in her eyes.

"Even MY bewilderment has its limits," I replied. "I think I can still answer for knowing my own child."

"Child!" she exclaimed, with all her easy gaiety of old times. "Do you talk in that familiar manner of one of the landed gentry of England? Are you aware, when I present this illustrious baby to your notice, in whose presence you stand? Evidently not! Let me make two eminent personages known to one another: Mr. Walter Hartright--THE HEIR OF LIMMERIDGE."

So she spoke. In writing those last words, I have written all. The pen falters in my hand. The long, happy labour of many months is over. Marian was the good angel of our lives--let Marian end our Story.