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About This Edition

This book is a simplified English adaptation created for extensive reading practice.
The text was generated using ChatGPT and prepared for intermediate English learners as part of an educational project.

Target reading level: CEFR A2-B1

This edition aims to support fluency development through accessible vocabulary, expanded narration, and improved readability while preserving the original story structure.

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Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified by ChatGPT)

Part 1

Audley Court stood in a low, green place surrounded by old trees and wide fields. You reached it by going down a long road between hedges, with quiet cows looking over at you as you passed. At the end of the road there was an old arch and a strange clock tower. The clock had only one hand, so it always seemed wrong, and it made the place feel even older. Beyond the arch lay the gardens, the fish-pond, the orchard, and the large house itself, spread out in an uneven square of gray walls, pointed roofs, and tall chimneys wrapped in ivy.

It was a house that seemed full of peace, but also full of secrets. The rooms did not fit together in any simple way. One room led into another, then into a narrow stair, then into a passage that brought you back where you had started. It felt less like a house planned by one man than a place built slowly by time itself, with one age adding a window, another age building a wall, and another age breaking both. People said there were hiding places in the house, and they were right. A child had once found a small secret space under the nursery floor, where old religious clothes had been hidden long ago.

Outside, there was a lime-tree walk beside the pond, dark and cool even in summer. At the end of it stood an old well, half lost under weeds and branches. The place looked made for secrets, but most evenings nothing more happened there than Sir Michael Audley walking slowly with his young wife beside him. After a short time they would go back into the drawing-room, where she played soft music until he fell asleep in his chair. It seemed a calm life, and many visitors wished they could stay in such a place forever.

Sir Michael Audley was fifty-six years old. He was tall and strong, with black eyes, a deep voice, and a white beard that made him look older than he felt. He had been a widower for seventeen years, and during that time his only daughter, Alicia, had ruled the house as if it were already hers. She was eighteen now, a fine

rider, a good painter, and a girl who liked open air better than sitting quietly indoors. She had always carried the keys of the house and liked to believe that she had managed everything herself. So when her father suddenly brought home a new wife, Alicia felt the change like a personal loss.

Lady Audley was young, beautiful, and very difficult to dislike. Before her marriage she had been Lucy Graham, a governess in the house of Mr. Dawson, the village surgeon. No one knew much about her past. She had come from London in answer to an advertisement, and her only

was from a school in Brompton where she had once taught. That

had been good enough, and so she had entered the Dawson household and begun her quiet work. But though her wages were small and her life was plain, she made that dull village seem brighter only by living in it.

Lucy Graham had the kind of beauty that made people trust her at once. She had soft blue eyes, fair curls, a sweet voice, and a smile that seemed full of kindness. The poor loved her because she sat with them and listened. Children loved her because she was gentle. Men admired her, women spoke of her, and servants remembered her with pleasure. She taught the Dawson girls music and drawing, went to church three times every Sunday, and seemed cheerful in every small duty. If she had dreams beyond that life, she never spoke of them.

Sir Michael first saw her often at church, and then at a small evening gathering at Mr. Dawson's house. That was enough. From then on he loved her completely, with the deep and uneasy love of a man who has come late to strong feeling. He did not think proudly of his title or his house. In fact, he hated the thought that she might accept him for those reasons. He told himself, "If she can care for me a little, if she does not love another man, then perhaps I may make her happy." He was shy in his love, almost humble, and that made him more touching than ridiculous.

Mrs. Dawson saw what was happening before Lucy did, or before Lucy admitted it. One day, while Lucy was finishing some drawings in the schoolroom, Mrs. Dawson said, "My dear Miss Graham, you ought to think yourself a very lucky girl." Lucy looked up and asked quietly, "What do you mean?" Mrs.

Dawson answered, “I mean that you may become Lady Audley, and mistress of Audley Court, if you wish.” At those words Lucy dropped her brush, turned red, then white, and sat very still.

“Please do not speak to me now,” she said after a moment. “I never thought of such a thing.” She covered her face with her hands and seemed to think deeply. Around her neck she wore a narrow black ribbon, and as she sat there she touched it again and again in a nervous way, almost angrily. At last she said in a bitter voice, “Some people are born unlucky, Mrs. Dawson. It would be too much good fortune for me to become Lady Audley.” Mrs. Dawson was surprised, for Lucy usually looked like the happiest creature in the world.

After that day the matter was spoken of more openly, and Lucy no longer showed surprise. In the Dawson house it soon became understood that if Sir Michael asked her to marry him, she would say yes. It seemed impossible that a poor governess should refuse such an offer. So one misty evening in August, when they were alone for a few minutes in the little drawing-room, Sir Michael spoke. He did not speak proudly or quickly. He told her that he loved her deeply, but added, “Lucy, I do not want any answer that is not true. I think there is hardly a greater wrong than for a woman to marry a man she does not love. If you do not care for me, say so. I would rather suffer that pain than have you give yourself to me for any false reason.”

Lucy did not look at him when he said this. She kept her eyes on the dim evening outside the window, and for a little time she was silent. Then, with a sudden strong feeling that changed her whole face, she fell on her knees beside him. “No, no, not that,” Sir Michael cried, deeply moved. But she said, “Yes, here. You are good. You are noble. But do not ask too much of me. Remember what my life has been. From the time I was a child I have known nothing but poverty, trouble, and shame. You cannot understand it, because life has always been easier for you. I cannot pretend to be better than I am. I cannot say that I do not see what your offer means. I cannot be blind to it.”

There was something wild in her voice as she spoke, and Sir Michael felt a strange fear. She clutched at the black ribbon on her neck as if it hurt her. He bent

down and asked gently, “Do you dislike me, Lucy?” “No,” she answered quickly. “Is there any one else you love?” he asked. She gave a sudden laugh that troubled him and said, “I do not love any one in the world.” After a pause he said, trying to be calm, “Then if you do not hate me, and if no other man stands between us, I see no reason we should not be happy together. Is it agreed, Lucy?” She answered only one word. “Yes.”

He lifted her up, kissed her forehead, and left the house. He had won what he wanted, yet he did not go away in pure joy. Some tender hope had died inside him even while his wish had been granted. He understood now that Lucy had not spoken the words he had longed to hear, and that his wealth and place had stood beside him when he asked for her hand. Still, he loved her too much to turn back. That night he walked away carrying both happiness and disappointment in the same heart.

Lucy went slowly up to her little room at the top of the house. She set down her candle and sat on the edge of her bed, white and still. Then she said in a low voice, “No more dependence. No more hard work. No more shame. The old life can disappear. Every sign of it can be lost and forgotten. Everything, except this. Except this.” All the while she had kept one hand on the ribbon at her throat. Now she drew from inside her dress the object hidden there and looked down at it. It was not a cross or a picture. It was a ring, wrapped in an old piece of paper, yellow with age and folded many times.

Part 2

Far away from Audley Court, another story was moving toward England over a wide gray sea. A young man stood on the deck of the ship Argus and looked down at the water with impatient eyes. He had spent many months on that long voyage from Australia, and now every day felt too slow to bear. He threw away the end of his cigar and said to himself, “She will be so pleased. Poor little girl, she will be so surprised.” Then he fell silent again, as if his thoughts had gone far ahead of the ship and reached England before him.

His name was George Talboys. He was about twenty-five years old, strong, handsome, and made dark by sun and weather. He had bright brown eyes, black hair, and a thick beard that covered much of his face. There were only a few first-class passengers on the Argus, and George was the liveliest among them. He laughed loudly, told stories, played games, opened bottles, and made friends with everyone from the captain to the sailors.

Yet he was not a man of books or serious study. When one lady tried to speak to him about poetry, he laughed as if she had made a joke. When another person spoke of politics, he showed little interest. He preferred walking the deck, talking to sailors, and staring at the waves for long stretches of time. As the ship came closer to England, however, his cheerful way began to change, and everybody saw it.

He became restless, almost wild with waiting. One hour he laughed more than ever, and the next he walked the deck in silence with a troubled face. He asked the sailors the same questions again and again. “How many days now? Ten? Eleven? Is the wind good? How fast are we going?” When they answered too slowly for his liking, he grew angry and called the ship an old broken thing fit only to carry wool, not living people with hearts.

One evening the sun was going down red behind the sea, and George stood alone with a cigar in his hand. The sailors had told him that only ten days remained before they would see the coast of England. “I will go ashore in the first little boat,” he cried. “If I must, I will swim to land.” The others laughed at him, but one person did not laugh. This was Miss Morley, a quiet governess of about thirty-three, who had become his friend during the voyage.

She came up on deck and stood beside him while the last light faded in the west. George took the cigar from his mouth and asked, “Does the smoke trouble you?” She answered, “Not at all. I only came to see the sunset.” He said at once, “It is beautiful, perhaps, but it is too long. Ten more days feel endless.” Miss Morley gave a soft sigh and said, “Do you want the time to pass quickly?” George turned and looked at her as if the answer were too plain. “Of course I do,” he said. “Do you not?”

She answered, “Not exactly,” and when he asked why, she spoke very sadly. She was going back to England to meet a man she had loved for fifteen years. He had been too poor to marry her, so she had gone away as a governess to save money for their future life. Now, after all those years, she feared that he might be changed, dead, or no longer willing to love the worn, tired woman who was returning to him. As she spoke of disappointment, George suddenly lost his color and dropped his cigar into the sea.

“Why do you say such things?” he cried. “I am going home to my wife. She is true. She is gentle. I trust her as I trust the sun to rise.” Miss Morley tried to calm him and said that her case was different, for she had been away much longer than he had. But George would not leave the matter there. Her fears had entered his heart, and for the first time since leaving Australia he began to wonder what might have happened during his absence. His earlier joy did not disappear, but a cold shadow fell across it.

So, to fight against that shadow, he began to tell Miss Morley his whole story. He said that he had once been an officer in a cavalry regiment and had fallen in love with a pretty young girl, the daughter of a poor old half-pay officer living in a seaside town. George married her for love, but his rich father was furious and stopped his allowance. George sold out of the army and tried to live on what money he had, but that money soon went. After their child was born, his young wife, tired, poor, and unhappy, broke down in tears, and George, half mad with shame and pain, left the house in despair.

That same day he heard men speaking about Australia and the gold fields. The idea struck him at once. Instead of throwing himself into the sea, as he had almost planned to do, he would go to the new world, make a fortune, and come back rich enough to lay it at his wife’s feet. He went home that night, wrote a short letter, divided the little money left between them, kissed his sleeping wife and child, and sailed away in a few days with almost nothing in his pocket. In Australia he suffered hunger, fever, hard work, and misery, but still he worked on because the thought of his wife gave him strength. At last, after years of failure, luck turned. He found a great piece of gold, sold it, and became a rich man in a single moment.

“I have more than twenty thousand pounds now,” he said proudly, “and in ten days I shall see my darling again.” Miss Morley asked if he had written to his wife during those long years. George answered, “No, not until the night before I left Sydney. I could not write while I had nothing but bad news to send. At last I wrote to tell her that I was coming home.” Even after saying this, he could not rest. He walked up and down the deck in growing trouble, then at last came back to Miss Morley with a calmer face. “I have been praying,” he said quietly. “Praying for my darling.”

While the Argus moved slowly toward England, the same August evening was closing over Audley Court. A deep red sunset burned on the old walls and turned the windows, the trees, and the pond to the color of fire. Even the old well at the end of the lime-walk seemed touched with red, as if danger itself were hidden there. At eight o’clock a young woman slipped quietly out of the house and crossed the grass. She was pale from head to foot, with light eyes, fair hair, and a colorless face that might have been pretty if it had shown more life. This was Phoebe Marks, Lady Audley’s maid.

A man was waiting for her by the broken woodwork of the old well. He was broad, rough, heavy, and dull-looking, with red hair and a thick neck. This was Luke Marks, Phoebe’s cousin and her lover. She sat down beside him and tried to speak softly and kindly, but he showed little warmth. He was more interested in money than in feelings, and when Phoebe spoke with envy about Lady Audley’s grand life, Luke answered only by asking how much they themselves might save, and whether one day they could buy a public house.

Phoebe could not stop thinking about her mistress. “Only three months ago she was a governess like me,” she said. “I saw her with old poor clothes, taking a little salary from Mr. Dawson. And now look at her.” She told Luke about the grand rooms, the mirrors from floor to ceiling, the painted ceilings, the dresses, the jewels, and the crowds of men who admired Lady Audley while she traveled abroad. Luke listened only enough to ask one useful question. Since Sir Michael and Lady Audley were out at dinner, could Phoebe take him inside and show him the house? She answered that she could.

They entered through the servants' hall after Phoebe got permission from the housekeeper. Carrying a candle, she led Luke through dark passages and great fine rooms until they reached Lady Audley's private apartments. Luke stared stupidly at the gold, satin, paintings, and shining furniture. In the dressing-room Phoebe began putting away dresses left on a sofa and taking things back to their places. Then she suddenly found Lady Audley's keys in the pocket of one dress and told Luke that now she could show him the jewel-case.

When she opened it, the jewels shone on white satin inside the box. Luke stared at them with hungry eyes and even picked up a bracelet, turning it in his rough red hands. "One of these would set us up in life," he said. Phoebe, frightened, told him sharply to put it back, and he obeyed, though unwillingly. Then, by chance, he touched a hidden spring in the box, and a secret drawer opened. Inside there were no jewels at all. There were only a baby's little wool shoe, wrapped in paper, and a small lock of soft fair hair.

Phoebe looked at these things with wide eyes. Luke called them useless rubbish, but she did not agree. She seemed to understand at once that this hidden little bundle mattered more than any diamond in the box. Without another word she took the paper parcel and put it in her pocket. Luke cried out in surprise and asked why she would take that when she had refused the bracelet. Phoebe turned to him with a strange smile and said, "I would rather have this. And you shall have the public house, Luke."

Part 3

Robert Audley was supposed to be a barrister, though almost nobody had ever seen him do the work of one. His name was on the law list, he had rooms in the Temple, and he had done all the formal things needed for the profession. But he had never tried seriously to build a career. He was handsome, lazy, kind, and full of dry humor. He smoked, read novels, kept stray dogs in his rooms, and let life pass by with very little effort. Even those who laughed at him generally liked him.

He was also a relation of Sir Michael Audley, and a favorite at Audley Court.

Alicia liked him better than she liked most people, though he never seemed to understand the value of such affection. He did not think much about money, marriage, or ambition. He moved through life as if comfort were enough. So when George Talboys almost ran him down in the street only hours after landing in England, Robert looked at the eager, bearded stranger with mild surprise until the other cried out, “Bob, have you forgotten me?” Then Robert recognized his old school friend, and at once gave him his arm and his friendship.

George quickly told him the great news. He had come back from Australia rich at last, with more than twenty thousand pounds, and his first thought was not food, rest, or sleep, but his wife. He wanted first to bank his money, and then to go straight to a coffee-house in Westminster where he expected to find a letter from her. On the drive through London he spoke with shining eyes and excited hope. “I will take a house by the river,” he said. “We will have a boat. My wife will sing, and you shall smoke, Bob, and be as lazy as you like.”

At the coffee-house the waiters knew George by sight from earlier days, but they had no letter for him. He asked twice, then spelled out his name, then sat very still while the waiter checked again and came back with the same answer. The disappointment struck him much harder than so small a thing seemed to deserve. Robert, who understood more than he often showed, did not joke. He sat opposite his friend and watched him in silence while George leaned forward with his face in his hands.

Then George picked up a newspaper lying near him and stared at the first page without really reading. After some moments he turned the paper toward Robert and pointed to one line among the deaths. It said that Helen Talboys had died at Ventnor, on the Isle of Wight, aged twenty-two. George’s face had changed completely. The warm color of travel and excitement was gone, and his skin looked almost gray. He did not cry out. He did not even seem able to feel at first. He only pointed, and looked at Robert with a terrible calm.

Robert tried to question the notice, because any friend would have done the same. “A line in a newspaper is not everything,” he said. “There may be some mistake.” George listened, but he did not argue much. Hope had not died entirely,

yet it had become sick and weak. Since the notice named a place, there was only one thing to do. They would go to Ventnor and learn the truth there, whether it hurt or not. So, instead of seeking comfort in London, the two young men turned south toward the sea and the grave that might or might not hold George Talboys's wife.

Ventnor gave them no mercy. In the churchyard they found the stone, and on the stone they found the same words again. Helen Talboys was written there in cold carved letters, with her age beneath. George stood before it like a man turned to stone himself. A newspaper line might have been a lie, but a grave, a churchyard, and a headstone were harder things to fight against. Robert watched his friend and saw that the blow had now truly entered his heart.

Yet even then there was something unsatisfied in George's grief. He had left his wife in anger and poverty, but he had never stopped loving her. Now he stood before her grave with no chance to ask forgiveness, no chance to see her face, no chance to tell her that he had come back rich at last and had meant to place his whole new life in her hands. The pain of loss was terrible, but the pain of lost time was perhaps worse. A dead wife could no longer hear a word of love or sorrow.

They soon found Captain Maldon, George's father-in-law, and the meeting was no comfort. The old man spoke of Helen's death, of illness, of funeral matters, and of what had happened after George's disappearance to Australia. But there was something weak and shabby in him, as there had always been. He was not the kind of father whose grief could make other people believe more deeply in the goodness of the dead. Even at such a time, he seemed to Robert selfish, broken, and not to be trusted with any great feeling.

George did not make a loud scene with him. In some ways that was sadder than anger would have been. He listened, asked what he needed to ask, and seemed only to grow colder. It was as if the great storm had already passed through him and left him empty. Robert saw that his friend was not the same man who had laughed on the ship or dreamed in the hansom on the way to Westminster. The return to England, which had looked like the beginning of happiness, had become the end of one life and the beginning of another.

When they left Ventnor, George carried his sorrow in silence. He did not wish to talk much about Helen, and Robert was too kind to force him. A man who has come home after years of labor, carrying hope in both hands, and then sees that hope broken before noon, is not easily led back into ordinary speech. Robert understood at least this much. George had imagined a wife waiting at the end of the voyage. Instead, he had found a grave.

So the two men returned to London, and George went with Robert to the Temple. There, in those quiet rooms where Robert had once wasted his time in lazy comfort, another kind of life began. George had money now, but money meant very little to him. He had reached the goal for which he had suffered so much, but the person for whom he had done it was gone. In place of his old bright impatience there came a strange stillness, broken now and then by dark thoughts that Robert did not like to hear.

Robert, who had once taken life easily, now found himself watching his friend with real anxiety. George could sit for a long time in silence, then suddenly speak of the past as if it had happened only yesterday. At other times he seemed hardly to care whether he lived or died. Robert did what he could. He kept near him, talked when talking helped, stayed quiet when silence was better, and tried to draw him little by little back toward the world. In this way the easy, idle man began, without knowing it, to move toward the deeper part he would later have to play.

For the moment, however, there was no mystery yet in Robert's mind, only sorrow. Helen Talboys was dead. George Talboys had returned too late. The golden dream of Australia had ended at a churchyard in Ventnor. And in the Temple, day after day, Robert watched his friend try to live with the truth that the woman he had loved, left, hoped for, and come back to save was already buried in English ground.

Part 4

A year passed after George Talboys returned to England and found his wife's grave. Time did not heal him, but it changed the look of his sorrow. The first

violence of the blow was over, yet the weight of it remained on him day after day. He could speak, laugh at moments, walk, travel, and sit with Robert in company, but there was always something absent in him, as if one part of his life had gone out forever. Robert, who had once cared for very little, now cared a great deal for his unhappy friend, and did what he could to keep him from sinking into useless misery.

In that same year Lady Audley had become one of the admired beauties of the county. She passed lightly through her bright rooms, sang at the piano, touched flowers with her little scissors, called Phoebe to arrange her curls again and again, and seemed restless from mere happiness. To look at her, no one would have thought that fear had ever touched her. She looked like a woman to whom the world had given everything she wanted. But under that pretty surface there were moments of uneasiness, and those moments began to trouble her when Robert Audley proposed bringing George Talboys down to Essex.

Robert wrote to Alicia and suggested that he might visit Audley Court with his friend. Alicia, who never loved her stepmother, answered in her usual sharp way. The objection, she said, came from Lady Audley. My lady was tired, or did not wish to receive strangers, or found some other excuse. The answer was not open or warm, and Robert noticed it at once. Still, he was not a man who easily gave up any small comfort he had planned for himself, and he wanted George to see the old house. So the two young men went to Essex in spite of the cold reply and stayed at the inn. Robert still thought more of ease than of mystery, but he remembered the refusal.

When they reached the neighborhood, Sir Michael behaved with his usual kindness. He invited Robert and his friend to dinner at the Court for the following evening, and there seemed no reason to refuse. George had no great wish for company, but he was willing to do as Robert pleased. He had become passive in many things. Once he might have rushed eagerly toward new scenes and new faces, but now he let himself be led. So the dinner invitation was accepted, and Robert expected nothing more serious from the visit than a little country quiet and a little family discomfort between Alicia and her stepmother.

Yet before that next dinner could take place, something happened that seemed small at the time and strange afterward. On the following morning Lady Audley received a telegram that called her suddenly to London. She left the Court at once, and the house was without its bright center. Soon after this, Alicia showed Robert a letter from her stepmother. In it Lady Audley asked to know exactly when Robert and his friend, Mr. Talboys, meant to leave Essex. The request was repeated again in a hurried little note added at the end, as if the writer cared more than she wished to show. Robert laughed a little at the time, but he kept the matter in his mind.

Dinner at the Court did not then happen in the way first planned, and the visit itself took on a drifting, uncertain character. George was quiet, heavy-hearted, and willing to go away if Robert wished. Robert, on the other hand, hated leaving any country house before he had seen all that was worth seeing in it. There was a kind of selfish laziness even in his curiosity. He liked old rooms, old trees, old family places, and all the gentle comfort that belonged to them. He declared that it would be a pity to leave Audley without seeing the whole building properly.

On the morning when they intended to return to London, chance delayed them. Robert woke with such a violent headache that even his easy nature complained in earnest. He begged George to forgive him and to put off the journey for another day. George agreed at once, and Robert spent the morning in a darkened room blaming bad cigars and bad luck by turns. He was not made for pain or inconvenience, and he talked of both as if they were personal insults. Still, the delay kept them in Essex a little longer, and that small delay mattered more than either of them knew.

Toward evening Robert felt a little better and proposed that they should walk over to the Court. “It will pass an hour or two,” he said, “and it is a shame to drag you away from this place without showing you the house.” George made no objection. So the two men crossed the meadows in the red light of sunset and went by the short path toward the old archway. The air was strangely still, yet the leaves moved now and then with a light shiver, as if they felt a storm before it came. The one-handed clock over the arch had already jumped forward, and the place looked heavy, dark, and full of waiting.

They found Alicia walking alone in the lime-tree avenue. The long path, dark with trees and shadow, had a gloomy look even before night fully fell. George, who usually noticed very little around him, stopped and looked at it with unusual attention. “It ought to be an avenue in a churchyard,” he said. Alicia gave him one quick look, perhaps surprised by the words, but she did not answer much about them. She was in no mood for poetry, and she had her own displeasures. There had already been enough trouble between herself and her stepmother, and she was never sorry to speak against my lady when she had the chance.

Alicia then produced another letter from Lady Audley. There was impatience in her manner as she showed it to Robert, for she hated being made a messenger for her stepmother’s wishes. The letter again asked when Robert and his friend intended to leave Audley. Alicia did not try to hide her anger. She thought the note insulting, and perhaps she was right. Robert read it in his slow way, turning it over in his mind more seriously than before. George had wandered a little away from them by then and stood by the edge of the ditch, striking the tall weeds with his cane and staring into nothing. He seemed present in body only. Alicia took back the letter, said she must answer it that very night, and rode away with tears in her eyes that pride quickly forced back.

When Alicia was gone, the evening felt even more strange. The road to London lay open for the next day, yet the Court, the trees, the note, and George’s listless silence all seemed to hold the two men there. Robert, still wanting to make use of the remaining hours, said again that they ought to see the house. George did not care either way, and so they went on toward the old place in the falling light. The sky had turned darker, and the quiet of the grounds seemed too deep to be natural. Even Robert, who was not imaginative when comfort did not help it, felt something heavy in the air.

He did not yet understand that several small things had already joined together into a chain: Lady Audley’s unwillingness to meet George, her sudden journey to London, her repeated questions about when they would leave, and the uneasy feeling that had settled on George since entering the Audley grounds. None of this was clear enough to become a suspicion. Not yet. But if Robert had been less lazy,

or more used to looking closely at life, he might already have begun to wonder why the presence of one quiet, sorrowful man should trouble Lady Audley so much.

The house stood before them at last, gray and old, with its dark passages, hidden corners, and deep rooms. Robert still thought chiefly of showing it off. George still moved like a man only half awake. Night was coming on. The storm had not yet broken, but it was near. And before that evening ended, Audley Court would show them something that neither of them would easily forget.

Part 5

The storm did not wait for the next day. About half an hour before midnight it broke over Audley with great violence. Robert Audley took it very easily. He lay on a sofa in the sitting-room at the inn, half reading an old newspaper and half drinking cold punch, as if thunder and lightning were only another small trouble in life. George Talboys was very different. He sat by the open window, listening to the thunder and looking out at the black sky, which opened now and then in hard blue lines of lightning, and his face grew white and fixed.

Robert watched him for some time and then said, “George, are you afraid of lightning?” George answered at once, “No.” But Robert was not convinced, and told him plainly that he looked frightened. George denied it again, though his face and manner said otherwise. He seemed angry not only with Robert, but with himself, as if he hated the weakness that the storm had brought out in him.

At Audley Court that same storm shook Lady Audley even more strongly. She later confessed that lightning terrified her. She would not undress, and had her bed moved into a corner, where she lay hidden behind the curtains with her face buried in the pillow. Sir Michael stayed near her all night, deeply troubled for her, and did everything he could to calm and protect her. Not until near morning, when the last thunder had gone far away, did she finally fall into a heavy sleep.

Yet when morning came she seemed changed again. She entered the breakfast-room at half past nine, fresh, pretty, and bright, singing softly as if the night had

left no mark on her. George too had altered. When Robert came down, he found his friend already waiting at breakfast, pale but calm, and even more cheerful than usual. George shook hands warmly with him and said, “Forgive me, Bob. I was in a bad temper last night. The storm upset me. It always did when I was younger.”

Robert asked whether they should go up to London by the express or remain and dine with Sir Michael. George said he would rather do neither. It was such a bright day, he said, that they should walk about, fish a little, and leave by the evening train instead. Robert, who never liked the trouble of opposing anybody, agreed at once. So after breakfast they ordered dinner for four o’clock, took up the fishing-rod, and set out together.

The morning after the storm was very clear and beautiful. The birds were loud in the trees, the wet leaves shone in the sun, and the fields looked fresh after the heavy rain. For a time the two young men walked quietly enough. Later, as the warm hours passed, Robert grew sleepy in the pleasant stillness of the meadows. George, who seemed quite himself again, spoke little, but there was no longer any sign of the strange fear that had troubled him in the night.

At last Robert lay down and fell asleep in the grass. When George left him there, he went alone toward Audley Court. He crossed a small bridge, passed through the meadows, and came to the house at a time when everything seemed especially quiet. Sir Michael was out walking. Alicia had ridden away long before. The servants were at dinner in the back part of the house. My lady, book in hand, was said to be in the lime-walk. George rang at the door and asked for Sir Michael and Lady Audley.

The servant told him that Sir Michael was out and that Lady Audley was walking in the lime-tree avenue. George looked disappointed, but only for a moment. Then he said something about wishing to see my lady, or going to look for her, and turned away without leaving a card or message. So he passed from the door and into the grounds. This was the last clear sight of George Talboys at Audley Court that day.

A long time passed before Lady Audley came back to the house. When she did return, she was not coming from the lime-walk at all, but from the opposite side,

carrying her open book and a heap of wild autumn flowers gathered from the fields. Alicia had just come back on her mare and was standing near the door with her great dog Caesar, who never liked Lady Audley and showed his teeth when he saw her. Alicia told her, “Mr. Talboys, the young widower, has been here asking for Sir Michael and you.” Lady Audley only lifted her eyebrows and answered lightly that they would see enough of him at dinner.

She went up at once to her own rooms. There, on the table in her boudoir, lay one of George’s gloves. Lady Audley rang sharply, and Phoebe Marks came in answer to the bell. “Take that litter away,” my lady said. Phoebe gathered up the glove, some dead flowers, and a few torn papers into her apron. Then she explained that she had been sewing by the window in her own room because the light was better there. As she turned to go, Lady Audley looked up, and the eyes of the two women met.

In the meadows Robert slept on peacefully for a time, not dreaming that the quiet summer afternoon had already changed the whole course of his life. When he awoke, George was gone. At first there was nothing alarming in that. George might have walked on to the house, or toward the inn, or even toward the station. But hour by hour the absence ceased to look natural. Before the day was over, Robert Audley would begin to understand that his friend had not merely wandered away for a short turn in the sunshine. He had vanished.

Part 6

Robert found Sir Michael and Lady Audley in the drawing-room that evening. My lady was at the piano, turning the pages of some new music, and she welcomed him with playful thanks for the sable furs he had once bought for her on a journey. Robert had almost forgotten the gift, for his mind was full of George Talboys. So after a short bow he said at once, “That foolish friend of mine has gone back to London and left me behind.” Lady Audley lifted her eyebrows and asked questions at once, while Alicia laughed and said that Robert could not live long without his dear companion.

Robert answered more seriously than either of them expected. He said that George had never recovered from his wife's death and that he sometimes feared his friend might do something rash in a dark hour. At these words all three listeners understood what he meant, though he did not speak the worst thing aloud. Lady Audley adjusted her bright curls before the glass and answered lightly, "How strange. I never thought men could care so long for one woman. I thought that when one pretty face was gone, another would do just as well." Robert replied, "George Talboys is not that kind of man."

Lady Audley only murmured, "How sad," as if the matter interested her more as a story than as real grief. Robert looked at her and thought again that Alicia had judged her rightly when she called her childish. Yet she was charming through the whole dinner. She laughed at her own inability to carve the pheasant, called Robert to help her, and talked so prettily that Sir Michael watched her with open pride. He was delighted by every small grace in her and wanted everyone else to admire them too.

During dinner Sir Michael mentioned that his wife had been low in spirits the day before because of a disappointment in London. Robert asked what had happened, and Lady Audley told the story herself. She said she had received a telegram from an old schoolmistress and friend who seemed to be dying and begged to be visited at once. But the message had no address, so she and Sir Michael had hurried to the old house where that lady had once lived, only to find strangers there and no trace of her friend anywhere. Robert said, "It was foolish not to send the address," and Lady Audley answered with gentle reproach that dying people do not always think of such things.

In spite of all her grace, Robert could not shake off a vague uneasiness. He sat by the window and listened to her soft talk, yet again and again his thoughts went back to George. He saw him in his mind first in the Temple, then at Southampton, then reading shipping notices in the newspaper, and at last lying dead in some lonely place. That last thought came to him so sharply that even he was startled by it. Lady Audley noticed that he was not listening and asked what he was thinking about.

“George Talboys,” Robert answered. At once she gave a little shiver and said, “You make me uncomfortable when you talk of him like that. One would think something terrible had happened.” Robert replied, “God forbid it. But I cannot help feeling anxious.” Later Sir Michael asked for music, and Lady Audley went to the piano. Robert carried candles to the instrument and stood near her while she played a sad piece from memory.

As she played, he watched her hands moving over the keys, her rings flashing in the candlelight, and the lace of her sleeves falling back from her wrists. Then the heavy bracelet on one wrist slipped down toward her hand, and she stopped to push it back. Before she could hide it, Robert saw a bruise on the white skin. He cried out, “You have hurt your arm, Lady Audley.” She quickly covered it and said it was nothing, adding that her skin bruised from the slightest touch.

Sir Michael came over at once and asked how it had happened. Lady Audley laughed and said she had tied a ribbon too tightly around her arm a few days before and that the mark had come from that. But when Sir Michael took the wrist in his large hand and Robert held up the candle, the bruise did not look like a ribbon mark at all. There were four narrow purple marks, like the print of four fingers, and across one of them a darker line, as if a ring had pressed into the flesh. Robert said nothing aloud, but in his mind he thought, “That story is not true.”

He left the Court at about half past ten, more troubled than before. He said he would go up to London early next morning and look for George in Figtree Court. “If I do not find him there, I shall go to Southampton,” he said. Lady Audley asked, “And if you do not find him there?” Robert answered, “Then I shall think that something strange has happened.” He walked back through the dark meadows to the inn, feeling more sad and uneasy than he liked to admit, even to himself.

Early the next morning he returned to the Temple. The canaries were singing in the room where George had slept, but everything was in the same neat order as before. No chair had been moved, no box opened, and no letter had been left behind. Robert tried to comfort himself by thinking that George might have come in very late and gone out again before daylight, but when Mrs. Maloney came up the stairs, she told him at once that no such thing had happened. She had been in

the rooms since six o'clock, and Mr. Talboys had not come home at all.

Robert left the Temple at once and went down to Southampton. When he reached the poor little house by the water, he saw little Georgey playing in the window, and something in the quiet look of the place told him even before the door opened that George was not there. Captain Maldon received him warmly enough and, after a few words, gave the news. George had indeed been there, but only for a short time in the middle of the night. He had come to see the child, stayed barely an hour, kissed the sleeping boy, and then left again for Liverpool, saying that he meant to sail once more for Australia.

Robert could hardly believe it. "What can this mean?" he cried. "Why should he go away like that, without a word to me, and without even taking his clothes from my rooms?" Captain Maldon answered in his weak, crying voice that perhaps Helen's death had unsettled George's mind. Robert rejected that at once. George had suffered deeply, he said, but his mind had not failed him. Still, the thing remained strange and unfriendly, and he could not help feeling hurt even while he defended his absent friend.

During this talk little Georgey climbed onto Robert's knee and played with his watch-chain. When Robert asked the child whether he remembered his father's visit, the boy said no, but then asked suddenly, "Where is the pretty lady?" Robert did not understand him at first. The child explained that he did not mean his mother, who had always cried, but another pretty lady who had worn fine clothes and given him a gold watch. Captain Maldon quickly said that this had been the wife of an old captain friend, but there was an uneasy air about him as he spoke.

When the boy asked to see the watch, the old man said it had gone to be cleaned. Then, almost in shame, he showed Robert a pawnbroker's paper for it instead. Left alone afterward in the dark little room, Robert lit a cigar and happened to pick up a half-burned scrap of paper from the hearth. It was part of a telegram. Most of it was destroyed, but enough remained for him to read that Talboys had come there the night before and had left by the mail for London on his way to Liverpool. Robert turned deathly white, folded the scrap carefully, and put it into his pocketbook. Then he said to himself, "This is false. Someone lied to me. I will

go to Liverpool tonight and find out why.”

Part 7

Robert left Southampton by the night mail, but Liverpool gave him nothing. He made inquiries there as he had promised himself, yet found no clear trace of George Talboys. When he let himself into his chambers at the Temple, dawn was creeping into the rooms and the canaries were only beginning to stir in their cage. There were letters waiting for him behind the door, but none of them were from George, and that silence hurt him more than he liked to confess even in his own thoughts.

He sat down heavily and tried to think in a calm way, but his mind would not obey him. Until now he had hoped that George had acted in some sudden pain and had gone away by choice. But the burnt telegram, Captain Maldon’s false story, and Lady Audley’s strange behavior would not let him rest. The whole thing had begun to look dark, and once that darkness had entered Robert’s mind, it would not leave. For the first time in his easy life, he felt himself held fast by one idea.

He tried to sleep, but sleep only brought trouble. When he did fall into a restless half-dream, George seemed always near him and yet always beyond his reach. Sometimes Robert saw him walking away across a lonely field, turning neither right nor left. Sometimes he saw only a grave, or a dark pool of water under black trees, or a hand lifted as if in warning. He woke again and again with the same cold feeling in his heart, and each time he told himself that these were only dreams, but he could not escape their power.

During the next days he moved about London like a man distracted. He read newspapers, looked at shipping reports, questioned people, and went over in his mind every hour of that last visit to Essex. He had never imagined himself capable of patient thought, but anxiety gave him a new kind of strength. He began to see that if he wished to know the truth, he must stop drifting and begin to act with care. A lazy man may remain lazy while life is easy, but pain can wake him.

So one evening, after long smoking and longer thinking, Robert sat down at

his writing-table and forced himself to put the whole matter into order. He wrote out each point slowly, numbering them one by one. First, Alicia had objected to George's visit because Lady Audley objected. Then Lady Audley had refused to meet George on the first evening. Then she had suddenly gone to London after receiving a telegram. Then she had written twice to ask when Robert and George were leaving Essex.

After that came the later and stranger things. George had looked with deep agitation at Lady Audley's portrait. He had shown a wild fear during the storm. The next day, after seeming calm again, he had chosen to remain in Essex and had walked alone to the Court. There, according to the servant, he had gone to look for Lady Audley in the grounds. After that point everything grew uncertain, except that false trail to Southampton and the telegram that had been partly burned.

When Robert had written all this down, he read it carefully, marked some points more strongly than others, and locked the paper away in the place where he kept important matters. Then he sat with a cigar in his hand and stared into the fire. "It is as dark as midnight from first to last," he said to himself. "The clue lies either in Southampton or in Essex." After a while he made up his mind. He would begin in Essex and look for George Talboys there, within a narrow circle round Audley Court.

But before he returned to the country, he tried one more public step. He placed notices in the newspapers asking for information. The advertisement was simple, but it carried a promise of reward, and Robert hoped that money might loosen some tongue that silence or fear had kept shut. Day after day the notice appeared: any person who had seen George Talboys since the seventh of September, or knew anything about him after that date, was asked to write to A.Z., 14 Chancery Lane. Robert hated the cold language of such notices, but he used it because he had nothing else.

Meanwhile life at Audley Court moved on with its pretty surface and its hidden trouble. Robert went there again and stayed some time, and for a week neither he nor Lady Audley spoke George's name. She painted, embroidered, laughed, and gave away dresses to poor neighbors with graceful kindness. He watched her more

closely than before and found that her beauty did not make his thoughts easier. The change from poor governess to rich lady seemed too great, and once, while she was painting, he said quietly, “Some women would do a great deal to make such a change.”

The words struck her at once. She dropped her brush, spoiled the face in the picture before her, and looked at him sharply. Then she laughed, tried to recover herself, and moved away to another window with her work. Robert noticed every sign, though he did not yet know how far he could trust them. He had no proof, only a growing conviction that behind Lady Audley’s childlike manner there stood another self, watchful and afraid.

At last she herself brought up George Talboys’s name, pretending only a light curiosity. She asked if Robert had seen that strange friend lately. He answered that he had not seen George since the day he vanished near Audley Court. Then he told, in a few words, of Southampton, Liverpool, and the telegram, while she listened with close attention. When he said that he meant to continue the search, she questioned him with care that she tried to hide, and Robert felt again that same chill certainty which had troubled him from the first.

Outside the great house, the advertisement in the newspapers was beginning to do its work. In inns, kitchens, village rooms, and little shops, men read the notice and talked of the promised reward. Among those who saw it were people much nearer to the truth than Robert yet knew. The name of George Talboys, printed in common public type, was moving quietly through the country, and with it moved fear, greed, memory, and old secrets not yet spoken aloud.

Robert himself did not know whose eye would stop at those words first, or what answer might come back to Chancery Lane. But he had gone too far now to turn back. The loss of George had become more than private sorrow. It had become a question that filled his days and his nights, changed his nature, sharpened his mind, and tied him to Audley Court with a bond stronger than friendship, ease, or family habit. Somewhere very near that old house, he believed, the truth was waiting.

Part 8

Late in November, on a dark morning full of wet fog, Phoebe Marks married her cousin Luke in the little church at Audley. The mist lay low over the fields and hedges, and even the cattle moved through it like blind creatures. Luke wore his awkward Sunday clothes and thought very little about the solemnity of the occasion. Phoebe, in a gray silk dress that had once belonged to Lady Audley, looked pale and uncertain, like a shadow dressed as a bride.

Luke's joy had nothing to do with tenderness. He had got the wife he wanted, but along with her he believed he had secured something even better. From the first, his eyes had been fixed on money and on the public-house he hoped one day to own. Phoebe understood this well enough, yet she went through the marriage quietly, as she had gone through many other hard things in her life. There was no real happiness in the union, only bargain, pressure, and fear.

Before that wedding day, Luke had already forced one important truth out of Phoebe. He had learned that Lady Audley had a secret worth money, and from that hour he treated my lady not with gratitude, but with rough insolence. When she first offered help toward setting them up in life, he demanded more. Phoebe fell on her knees and begged forgiveness, but Luke stood his ground, and Lady Audley saw clearly that she had tied herself to a cruel and greedy man through the weakness of her maid.

After the marriage, Luke and Phoebe settled at the Castle Inn at Mount Stanning. It was exactly the kind of place Luke liked, a rough country house where drink, noise, and bad company were never far away. Phoebe tried to keep accounts, to save money, and to hold ruin back by patience and neatness. But Luke drank freely, spent carelessly, and grew more dogged and coarse as time went on, until the inn became less a home than a burden.

Again and again Phoebe had to go to Lady Audley for help. She hated these visits, but Luke drove her to them by loud commands and by the power he held over both women. Lady Audley paid brewer's bills, met debts, and gave money that she could hardly spare, all the while growing bitter at the thought that her

own fine life was being quietly sold away piece by piece. She told Phoebe in anger that her jewel-case had been half emptied and her allowance overdrawn to satisfy these endless claims.

So while Robert Audley waited for answers to his advertisement, another line of the story was tightening at Mount Stanning. The printed notice in the newspapers did not move Luke to honest speech, but it added to the uneasiness of that house. Phoebe lived in constant fear of some sudden exposure, some burst of temper from her husband, or some day when Lady Audley would refuse to help them any longer. The Castle Inn, with its debts, its drinking, and its dark knowledge, stood like a bad outpost on the edge of Audley Court's calm life.

Robert soon decided that waiting in London was useless. If George Talboys had truly vanished in Essex, then Essex was the place where the truth must be sought. So he came down to Mount Stanning and took rooms at the Castle Inn itself. It was exactly the kind of decision that would once have seemed too troublesome for him, and that showed how deeply he had changed. He no longer drifted with the easiest choice, but chose the most uncomfortable one because he believed it might lead him nearer to George.

At the inn Robert watched and listened with new patience. He asked few direct questions, but he kept his eyes open. Luke Marks did not please him from the first, and Phoebe, with her pale face and careful manner, seemed to him a woman living under strain. Robert had not yet gathered enough to accuse anybody of anything, but he felt more strongly every day that the disappearance of George Talboys had roots in this district and that ordinary explanations would never cover it.

He also saw that his own presence made people uneasy. Luke became sullen and suspicious. Phoebe looked frightened whenever he entered the room unexpectedly. Even the air of the place seemed charged with hidden trouble, as if words had been spoken there that could not safely be spoken again. Robert was still only watching, but his quiet watchfulness had begun to act on others like pressure.

News of his stay soon reached Audley Court, and Lady Audley did not hear it with calm. She had once been merely anxious to know when Robert would leave

Essex. Now he had returned of his own will and placed himself near her, not as a careless guest, but as a man who meant to remain until he had learned something. She understood the change better than anyone else did. The lazy cousin who had once smoked and joked through life was becoming dangerous.

Sir Michael, kind and unsuspecting as always, could not at first see the full meaning of Robert's conduct. He was willing to believe in his nephew's affection, his grief for George, and his desire to clear up a painful mystery. Lady Audley, however, had already begun to suggest that Robert was no longer thinking naturally. She did not yet need to say everything plainly. It was enough to hint that George Talboys's disappearance had become a fixed idea with him and that he was beginning to connect too many things together.

Robert, meanwhile, kept his ground at Mount Stanning. He said little, but within himself his purpose had hardened. He was no longer searching only because George was his friend. He was searching because silence, fear, falsehood, and strange movements had gathered too closely round Audley Court to be accident. And while the winter fog thickened over the flat country, Robert Audley stayed on at the Castle Inn, very quiet to outward appearance, but inwardly more resolved than ever to watch.

Part 9

The next morning brought heavy snow. Robert Audley sat over his breakfast at the Castle Inn with a county newspaper on his knees and his dogs beside his chair, waiting for the bits of toast or ham that usually fell to their share. Outside, the road toward Audley lay white and empty under thick falling flakes. The whole world looked shut in and silent, and Robert, staring through the window at the lonely scene, said to himself that it was lively enough for a man used to Temple Bar.

He had scarcely settled back by the fire when he saw a brougham come slowly up through the snow. That in itself surprised him, for very few people would choose such weather for a visit. His surprise became much greater when Phoebe

Marks came in and announced Lady Audley. Robert at once understood that this was no idle call. “A false move, my lady,” he thought, “and one I never expected from you.” Even before she entered, he felt that she had come because fear had driven her to it.

Lady Audley looked wonderfully bright in spite of the bitter day. She came in wrapped in the rich sables Robert had once brought for her, with a great muff in her hands and her face as fresh and pretty as if the cold had no power over her at all. She stood by the fire warming her gloved hands and looked so small, delicate, and almost childlike that any stranger might have found it difficult to connect danger with such a figure. Robert, however, no longer trusted appearances where she was concerned.

She began by saying that she had come because she wished particularly to see him. Then, with some embarrassment, she spoke of the way he had been treated at Audley Court and said that an apology was due. Robert answered that he did not want one, but she insisted in a light playful tone that her dear silly husband had taken it into his head that a nephew of eight or nine and twenty, smoking cigars in her boudoir, might somehow disturb his poor little wife’s peace of mind. She tried to make the matter sound foolish and harmless, as if she had come only to laugh away an awkward family misunderstanding.

Robert did not wholly follow her lead. He could laugh a little, because that was his habit, but inwardly he watched every movement of her face and hands. Lady Audley then turned the talk toward George Talboys. She asked what Robert would do if no answer came to the advertisements in the papers. He said that in that case he would feel justified in thinking his friend dead. She pressed him at once: “And then?” Robert answered that he would examine the effects George had left in his chambers.

This answer interested her more than any other part of the conversation. She tried to hide it, but Robert saw the change. She asked what those effects were. He said there were letters from George’s friends, his schoolfellows, his father, his fellow officers, and also letters from his wife. At that Lady Audley fell silent for a little time and looked thoughtfully into the fire. Then she asked whether Robert

had ever seen any of the late Mrs. Talboys's letters. He said no, but added lightly that they were not likely to tell him very much. He ended, half in compliment and half in experiment, by remarking that very few women wrote so uncommon and charming a hand as Lady Audley's own.

Before that point the talk had already grown serious in another direction. Robert had said plainly that he believed horrible crimes could be done under fair roofs and in smiling places, and that men might look into the face of a murderer and admire its beauty without knowing what they saw. Lady Audley laughed at him and said he should have been a detective officer. Robert answered, "I sometimes think I should have been a good one." When she asked why, he replied only, "Because I am patient." The word was very simple, but it carried more weight than she liked.

She had also heard from him, in few but steady words, that he doubted the Southampton story and no longer believed George had safely gone away. He said that he saw two likely conclusions, and that the darker of them was this: George Talboys had never really gone beyond the point where Robert lost him. Lady Audley tried to meet this with pity, surprise, and feminine weakness, speaking as if such subjects were far too dreadful for a poor little woman. But Robert did not soften much. He had ceased to treat her as merely pretty and began to feel that every word between them might matter.

At last she rose to go. She said once more that although Robert had refused her apology, she trusted he was assured of her feelings toward him. He answered that he was perfectly assured. The words sounded polite, but neither of them misunderstood the meaning beneath them. When she held out her hand, he took it very loosely, and as he did so he thought how easily such a small frail hand could be crushed if strength alone decided the contest between them.

Robert saw her to the carriage and stood watching it drive away through the snow. It did not go back toward Audley Court, as he might naturally have expected. Instead it went in the direction of Brentwood. This struck him at once, though he said nothing. About an hour and a half later, while he stood smoking at the inn door and watching the white fields, he saw the same brougham come back empty.

That sight added one more small fact to the many small facts already pressing on his mind.

The visit had failed in whatever purpose had brought Lady Audley through the storm. If she had meant to quiet him, she had not succeeded. If she had meant to draw out his plans, she had done so only at the cost of showing her own anxiety too clearly. Robert was no longer content to sit still and wait for chance. Her particular interest in George's letters had fixed his next step for him. He must go to London, open George Talboys's box, and see what those papers could tell him.

So when the snowy day closed in and the inn grew dark around him, Robert's mind was more settled than before. The bright little lady who had come smiling to the Castle Inn had only made the danger behind her smile seem greater. She had played lightly with apology, jealousy, and family talk, but beneath all that there had been fear. Robert had seen it. And now, with patience rather than brilliance, he prepared to follow the next faint thread that might lead him nearer to George Talboys.

Part 10

Robert left the Castle Inn at once and followed Lady Audley to London. He reached the station in time to see the train for Colchester standing ready, and there, hurrying in at the last moment, was Lady Audley herself. She almost ran against him in her haste, then looked up and cried out with pretty surprise, "Robert, you here already?" She asked him to open the carriage door for her, and he did so while watching her face closely. Only a few hours earlier she had shown him fear and weakness at Mount Stanning, but now she looked bright, light, and daring again, as if some success had given her courage.

She explained her journey at once, too quickly to sound quite natural. She said that she had come to London to settle a large bill from her dressmaker, and that she had done it without telling Sir Michael because she did not want him to think her wasteful. Robert answered politely enough, but he did not believe her. There was something too ready in the story and something almost victorious in her smile.

When the train began to move, the last thing he saw was that bright, defiant look on her face, and he said to himself that whatever had brought her to London, she had done what she came to do.

He went back to the Temple still asking the same question: “Why did she come to London?” His rooms stood in their usual order. The birds had been covered for the night, the flowers had been watered, and everything looked quiet and harmless. But Robert passed quickly through the sitting-room and into the little inner room where George Talboys’s trunk and portmanteau had been left. It was these he cared about now, for he felt sure that Lady Audley’s London journey and George’s luggage were somehow connected.

He examined the lock of the portmanteau by candlelight and then sent for Mrs. Maloney. When she came, he asked at once whether any person, and especially any lady, had asked for the key of his rooms that day. Mrs. Maloney, after much confusion and wandering talk, told him that no lady had come, but that a locksmith had done so. The man had said he came by Robert’s own orders to examine the locks, and she, believing him, had let him in. Robert understood at once that this was no chance visit. Someone had wanted access to his rooms while he was away.

He questioned Mrs. Maloney patiently, though her answers tried his patience more than open trouble would have done. She admitted that the man had been alone for some minutes at a time while she moved in and out of the rooms. That was enough. Robert did not waste more words. He put on his hat and went out through the dirty snow to find the locksmith in a small street behind St. Bride’s Church. His mind was no longer doubtful on one point at least. Somebody had sent that man to Figtree Court for a purpose, and that purpose had something to do with George Talboys.

The locksmith’s shop was low, dark, and noisy, but Robert forced his way in and got the truth from the man. A young lady, closely veiled, had employed him. She had paid him well, and had given him instructions that seemed simple enough to him, though suspicious enough to Robert. The locksmith had opened George Talboys’s box and then locked it again so neatly that no ordinary eye would have seen the difference. Robert asked no more than he needed to ask, because the rest

had already become clear. Lady Audley had gone to London not for any milliner's bill, but to make sure that some paper in George's luggage should be taken away before Robert could see it.

When he returned to his chambers, he wrote down every fresh fact in that careful record he had now begun to keep. Then he took a bunch of keys, went back to George's trunk, and opened it for himself. He emptied the box slowly, lifting out each article as if it belonged to a dead man and deserved gentle handling. There were mourning clothes, old pipes, gloves, playbills, perfume bottles, parcels of letters, scraps of newspapers, and a small heap of worn-out books. Everything had the sad look of things once loved and long laid aside. But among all these memorials one thing was missing. The packet of letters written by Helen Talboys was gone.

That loss told Robert more than any direct confession could have told him. He knew George had kept those letters. He had seen him once handling them with deep feeling and tying them with a faded ribbon that had belonged to his wife. If they were no longer in the trunk, then the hidden visitor had taken exactly what mattered most. Robert put back the clothes and loose papers one by one, then kept the old books out, thinking that there might still be something useful among them. He was tired, troubled, and almost sick at heart, but he forced himself to go on.

Sitting by the lamp, he searched the books one after another. Most of them gave him nothing. There was an old grammar, a Greek Testament, a broken novel, a cheap copy of Don Juan, and then a thick annual in a faded red-and-gold cover. As he turned its leaves, a small lock of bright golden hair fell out. Robert wrapped it carefully and laid it aside. Then, because he was determined to leave nothing unexamined, he separated two stuck pages at the front of the book and found writing hidden there.

The inscription was in three different hands. First, the book had belonged to a schoolgirl named Elizabeth Ann Bince. Later it had been given by that same girl to her dear friend Helen Maldon. At last, in September 1853, Helen Maldon herself had given the annual to George Talboys. Robert turned pale when he read those words. The name Helen Maldon joined the dead Helen Talboys to the older

life she had lived before marriage, and the book had come to George from her own hand. The missing letters had been stolen, but enough remained. Robert now knew that the line he was following led back beyond Helen Talboys's grave and toward the hidden life from which Lady Audley had risen.

He sat for some time with the annual in his hand, feeling that the last weak hope had gone. "I thought it would be so," he said to himself. "I was ready for the worst, and the worst has come." He did not yet know every step in the story, but he understood now that Helen Maldon, Helen Talboys, and the bright Lady Audley of Essex could not be kept apart much longer. The chain was growing stronger. The missing letters themselves were proof that someone feared what they would show.

Yet Robert was not thinking only of Lady Audley. He thought also of little Georgey, still left in that poor house under the shadow of lies, weakness, and old corruption. If his father was truly dead, then the child must be protected at once. So before the night ended, Robert had made up his mind on the next step. He would go again to Southampton, take charge of George's boy, and place him in safer hands. After that, he would go on. He would not stop now. Justice to the dead must come first, and mercy to the living afterward.

Part 11

Robert went again to Southampton and took charge of little Georgey. The child was too young to understand the danger and sadness around him, and this made the whole business harder in one way and easier in another. He talked of food, clothes, servants, and small pleasures with the complete freedom of a spoiled boy. Robert, who had never been made for children, stared at him in helpless surprise more than once. Still, he had made up his mind that George Talboys's son must not remain any longer in that poor house by the sea, under the weak care of Captain Maldon and the shabby disorder that surrounded him.

So he carried the boy away and kept him with him for a short time on the journey. Georgey accepted the change very easily. He was delighted by good

dinners, by the attention of inn servants, and by the idea of new clothes. Robert, half amused and half troubled, ordered food for him with the air of a man arranging some strange ceremony that he did not understand. The waiter admired the child's appetite, and Georgey did indeed do justice to soup, cutlets, bird, pudding, and even more ale than Robert thought proper for such a small gentleman.

In the middle of all this childish comfort, Robert could not forget why he was acting. He had taken George's son into his care because George himself could no longer be found, and because every day made the darker answer more likely. While the boy ate happily, Robert walked alone by the waterside in the drifting snow and thought about Dorsetshire. He had already resolved on the next step. He would see George's father, tell him everything that had happened, and ask for advice before he went farther. If any right remained to Harcourt Talboys as a father, then it was right that he should hear the truth from Robert's own mouth.

That evening Georgey was sent on toward his new school, with money in his pocket, a letter of instruction, and high spirits that were not at all lowered by the separation. He talked on the way to the carriage about his clothes, about people in the Southampton house, and about poor Matilda's little boy, Billy, who would now wear his old things. Robert listened, smiled faintly, and then let the child go. When the fly drove off into the winter night, he felt a little easier on one point at least. George's son was safe for the moment. But the father's fate still stood before him like a closed black door.

On the next day Robert traveled into Dorsetshire and came by evening to the house of Harcourt Talboys. The place suited its owner exactly. It was a square red-brick house standing in square grounds, arranged with stiff care and without warmth or beauty. Nothing in it suggested the bright, impulsive, generous nature of George. Before Robert even saw the master of the house, he felt that this was the kind of home in which pride might grow hard and affection grow cold. The very order of the place seemed to say that feeling was less welcome there than rule.

Harcourt Talboys himself confirmed that first impression at once. He was cold,

exact, dignified, and self-regarding. There was no likeness between him and George, not in face, not in manner, and not in heart. Robert had expected hardness from the cruel letter he had earlier received, but even so, the man's dry self-control and formal vanity disgusted him. In the same room, seated at one of the windows with plain sewing in her hands, was a young lady whom Robert at once guessed to be George's sister. She was indeed like George, and the sight of that likeness gave Robert a little sudden hope that at least one member of the family might feel deeply for the missing man.

That hope did not rise very high at first. When Clara half rose as Robert entered, she dropped her work in some confusion, and her father sharply ordered her to sit down and keep her cotton in order. The reproof was so cold and public that Robert disliked the man even more than before. He himself picked up the lost reel and returned it, while Harcourt Talboys stared at the simple act as if it were something extraordinary. Then, with great solemnity, the father invited Robert to sit and explain his business. Clara remained in her place by the window, quiet and pale, with her work before her.

Robert began by saying that he had written before and had come now on a very painful matter. Harcourt Talboys answered stiffly that he had received the earlier letter and that it had been answered in due form. When Robert spoke of George as his dear friend, the father interrupted more than once with hard little remarks about his son's marriage and conduct. Even now he would not speak warmly or simply. Clara, meanwhile, remained silent. At first Robert almost believed her indifferent, because she did not cry out or question him, and because her face was turned so that he could not clearly see it.

Then Robert said the one thing that mattered most. He told Harcourt Talboys plainly that he had strong reason to fear George was dead, and more than that, to fear that he had been murdered. The word struck both father and daughter at once. They repeated it together, and Clara's face dropped into her clasped hands. The father changed color for a moment, but the effect did not last. He recovered himself with surprising speed and almost angrily rejected the whole idea, as if pride could answer where feeling should have spoken.

Robert then did what he had come to do. He laid out the whole story in careful order, step by step, from George's return to England to his disappearance, including the false trail to Southampton and the reasons for his growing suspicions. He had already written these facts down for his own use, and now he gave them to George's father as clearly and calmly as he could. He even suppressed some names, because he still wished, if possible, to spare open shame to Audley Court. Clara never lifted her head while he spoke. The father listened with great attention, but it was the attention of vanity and self-importance rather than grief.

When the whole account was ended, Robert asked for a decision. If Harcourt Talboys said he was foolish and unjust, Robert was ready to submit. If he said go on, Robert would go on. But the answer he received was useless. Harcourt Talboys declared that he still believed George alive and that the disappearance was part of some trick or conspiracy directed against himself. He would not accept Robert's fears, and he would not help the search in any serious spirit. In effect he left Robert to continue alone, while pretending to stand above the whole matter in superior wisdom.

That answer wounded Robert deeply, though he had expected little. He rose and said with sudden bitterness that from that moment he would wash his hands of the business and try to forget it. The words were not fully true, even as he spoke them, but they came from real pain. He bowed to Harcourt Talboys and then looked toward Clara, still hoping for some sign from her. He thought she might lift her face, speak one word, or show by some movement that she cared for her brother and wanted Robert not to stop. But she remained bent over, silent and still.

So Robert left the house in a mood darker than the one in which he had entered it. He believed that George had had very few friends in the world, and that even in his own family love had been cold and poor. As he went down the steps and climbed into the waiting carriage, he told himself that the matter had come to a standstill. The father would not help him. The sister, he thought, had shown no heart. He was alone again with his suspicions, his patience, and the long black doubt that still stretched from Audley Court to the unknown fate of George Talboys.

Part 12

Robert did not get far from the Talboys house before he learned that he had judged Clara too quickly. The next morning he saw her again, away from her father's hard presence and the stiff order of that cold home. Then, for the first time, she spoke freely. She had not been indifferent in the drawing-room. She had been silent because long habit had taught her silence under her father's eye.

Once she was alone with Robert, all that silence changed into a deep and terrible earnestness. She told him that her mother had died when she was very young and that her brother had been almost the whole object of her love. There was no noise in her grief and no weak crying. Her sorrow stood up straight and severe, like the woman herself. When she spoke of George's possible death by treachery, her face seemed to Robert nobler and more beautiful than before.

Clara did not beg for comfort, and she did not ask Robert to spare her feelings. What she wanted was truth and justice. If George Talboys had been murdered, she wished the murderer found. If some secret lay hidden behind his disappearance, she wished it dragged into the light. Her whole nature seemed made of quiet force, and Robert felt that she had reached the same dark conclusion he himself had reached, though no one had spoken it plainly in her father's room.

Robert answered her more seriously than he had ever answered any woman in his life. He said that George should not be forgotten and should not go unavenged. He did not boast of skill or cleverness, because he knew his own nature too well for that. But he said he believed he could follow the mystery more surely than hired men, if she would trust him and be patient. Clara answered at once, "I will trust you." That simple answer bound him more strongly than any dramatic promise could have done.

He then asked whether she had any letters of her brother's. She told him that she had two. One had been written soon after George's marriage, and the other at Liverpool on the night before he sailed for Australia. Robert at once saw how much those letters might matter. George had always avoided speaking in detail of

his married life after that first great blow in London, and Robert knew very little of where he had lived with Helen or what names and places belonged to that lost year of happiness and ruin. Clara promised to send the letters to him.

She also told him that she would soon be leaving home for a long visit with friends in Essex. That word struck Robert sharply, for Essex was the ground on which the whole dark business seemed to rest. Clara saw his agitation and understood more than he had meant to show. “My brother disappeared in Essex,” she said. Robert could not deny it. He answered only that his position was becoming more painful every day, because the truth he sought led him closer and closer toward people who were tied to his own life and home.

Yet the understanding between them was now complete. Neither named Lady Audley, and neither needed to do so. Each felt that the same shadow lay over Audley Court, over George Talboys’s loss, and over the path Robert must now follow. Clara gave him her hand, cold and still from the strain of that meeting, and he urged her to return home before she suffered too much from the violence of her own feelings. She almost seemed to despise the word suffer. What she feared was not pain, but helplessness.

Their talk ended only when other people entered the churchyard and made private speech impossible. Robert left in haste, but not in despair. For the first time since George had disappeared, he no longer felt entirely alone with his burden. Clara had not only believed him. She had also pushed him forward. Her grave trust, her stern love for her brother, and her hatred of delay worked on him more strongly than any direct command could have done.

After Robert had gone, Clara remained full of thought. The name Audley had now become important to her in a new way. When she soon afterward heard from a friend in the neighborhood that Sir Michael Audley had married a very beautiful young wife, once a poor governess named Miss Graham, she listened with close attention. The friend described Lady Audley as fair, childish-looking, blue-eyed, and crowned with pale golden curls. Clara asked no more questions aloud, but in her heart she remembered words from George’s own letter written during his honeymoon, where he had described his young wife in almost exactly the same

way.

Robert, meanwhile, returned to London with clearer purpose than before. Clara's promise of the letters gave him something firm to work toward, and her trust would not let him sink back into his old habits of delay. He had once called himself a lazy, useless fellow, and the description had not been false. But now every step drew him farther from that former self. He was being changed by friendship, by grief, and by the cold steady pressure of a woman who believed he must act.

When the letters reached him, or when he had enough from Clara to guide his next move, he would begin again from another point. He had already followed Lucy Graham backward as far as he could for the moment. The next task, he now understood, was to begin at the other end and trace Helen Talboys's life from George's departure to the day of the funeral in the churchyard at Ventnor. That path, dark as it was, might finally join the broken story together.

So the search did not stop at the door of Harcourt Talboys's house, as Robert had angrily promised himself it would. It began there anew. Clara Talboys had taken her place in it, not as a helpless mourner, but as a living force. And from that hour Robert Audley no longer searched only because a friend had vanished. He searched because someone had looked at him with complete faith and had silently told him that weakness, delay, and comfort were no longer permitted.

Part 13

Robert Audley began the next stage of his search in a colder and more exact spirit than before. He was no longer following one broken clue here and another there. He now had a fixed plan. He would trace Lady Audley backward, step by step, from the rich rooms of Audley Court to the earliest place where she could be clearly found. If he could learn where Lucy Graham had come from, then perhaps he could join that life to the lost life of Helen Talboys. It was a hard task, and one that led him toward a truth he dreaded, but he did not turn away from it.

He first went to Mr. Dawson, the surgeon, and spoke to him more plainly than

he had ever done before. He did not accuse Lady Audley openly, because even now he wished, if possible, to spare Sir Michael the full force of shame until proof left no escape. But he said enough to astonish and alarm the surgeon. He said that he must know the history of Lucy Graham's life and that he meant to follow it back carefully from the present year to the year 1853. Mr. Dawson was deeply troubled, but he saw that Robert was in earnest and would not be stopped by refusal.

So the surgeon told him all that he could. Lucy Graham had entered his house a little more than thirteen months before her marriage to Sir Michael. She had come there in May 1856, and she had been recommended by a schoolmistress in Brompton named Mrs. Vincent. Mr. Dawson had not seen this lady himself. He had only received her written

and had found it so satisfactory that he asked no more. To Robert this answer was useful, though not comforting. Once again Lucy Graham seemed to stand at the edge of knowledge, smiling, capable, and admired, but with no true beginning visible behind her.

From the surgeon's house Robert went up to London and found Mrs. Vincent's school. It was one of those places where order, respectability, and small economies covered everything like a thin clean cloth. Mrs. Vincent herself was soft-spoken, respectable, and ready enough to speak of Miss Graham as a young woman of excellent conduct. Yes, she had been there. Yes, she had taught at the school. Yes, she had been much liked. But from where had she come before that? At this question the clear path began at once to break and fade. Mrs. Vincent knew very little. Lucy Graham had come into the school as if from nowhere, bringing beauty, gentleness, and good writing with her, but not a past that could be easily named.

Robert did not let the matter rest there. He looked at the books, the dates, the small records of the place, and spoke also with the assistant. By patience and close questioning he fixed at least one important point. Lucy Graham had entered the school in August 1854. That date mattered more than any praise of her manners or talents. Robert now had a firm year and month. It did not yet prove the truth he feared, but it marked the point where Lucy Graham first appeared under that name.

If Helen Talboys had vanished shortly before that time, then the two lines were beginning to move dangerously near each other.

Still, there was no decisive proof. Mrs. Vincent could describe Lucy Graham as fair, clever, graceful, and very much admired, but she could not tell Robert where the young woman had lived before entering the school. No letters remained that showed it clearly. No relative had come forward. No friend of childhood had written. Lucy seemed to have stepped into Brompton out of mist, and Robert, who had hoped to force the past open by mere persistence, began to feel the old frustration returning. Yet he kept his temper and continued to search the room and the small forgotten property left in Mrs. Vincent's care.

There, by chance or by justice, he found what he needed. A box left behind by Lucy Graham still remained in Mrs. Vincent's possession. On it one name had been pasted over another. The upper label showed the name by which all the world had since known her. But under that newer label lay an older one, and on it Robert read the name Mrs. George Talboys. That small piece of paper joined the two broken stories more strongly than all his guesses had done. It was the clearest link yet between the woman buried in the newspaper and the woman who had become Lady Audley.

Robert stood with that discovery in a kind of dark triumph that gave him no pleasure. He had wanted truth, but truth was beginning to look exactly like ruin. Now he could see the shape of the thing more clearly than before. Helen Talboys had left her father's house declaring that she wished to throw off her old life and begin anew. Lucy Graham had appeared almost at once afterward, friendless, accomplished, and curiously convenient in her lack of background. The two names were no longer far apart in his mind. They had begun to rest on the same woman.

Yet even after that, the backward search stopped. Robert could trace Lucy Graham only as far back as Mrs. Vincent's school. Beyond that threshold all remained dark. The schoolmistress and her assistant could tell him when Lucy had entered the house and what she had been like there, but they could not tell him where she had been born, where she had first lived, or what events had

brought her to Brompton in August 1854. Her earlier life still lay hidden as completely as before. The trail had become sharper, but it had also reached a wall.

Robert walked away from the school under the gray February sky with a heavy heart. He now carried in his pocketbook a fact that might one day destroy the peace of the house he loved. He had promised Clara Talboys that he would not abandon the search, and he had no right to abandon it now. But he saw that he could go no farther in one direction. Lucy Graham's life ended abruptly, for the purposes of inquiry, at the school door. If he wished to complete the truth, he must stop pushing backward from Lady Audley and instead come forward from Helen Talboys.

"I must begin at the other end," he thought, and the thought remained with him as he walked. He understood now what that meant. He must discover the history of Helen Talboys from the hour George left England until the day when a funeral was said to have taken place at Ventnor. Somewhere in that interval lay the lost bridge between the deserted wife and the great lady of Audley Court. George had rarely spoken of his short married life, because too much pain and self-reproach were mixed with every memory of it. So Robert knew far less than he now needed to know. That ignorance had to be repaired at once.

He drove straight back to his chambers and wrote immediately to Clara Talboys. He asked for the name of the small seaside town where George had first met Captain Maldon and Helen. It was a practical question, asked in haste to save time, but behind it stood all the force of his new resolve. If the trail would not open further backward from Lucy Graham, then he would follow it forward from Helen Talboys. He even asked Clara to answer by telegraph so that not one day would be lost. That was not the old Robert Audley speaking. That was the man grief and duty had made out of him.

The answer came quickly. The place was Wildernsea in Yorkshire. At once another piece of George's hidden life came into shape. Robert remembered that one of George's letters after marriage had been dated from Harrowgate, which must have been where the young couple spent their honeymoon. After that there had been Wildernsea, Captain Maldon, poverty, the child, and then the long

silence before the death notice in the newspaper. Robert now had direction again. The backward search had done all it could do. The forward search must begin.

So he closed his notes, put away the proof he had gathered, and prepared for another journey. He had not solved the mystery, but he had changed its shape. Lucy Graham was no longer merely an unknown governess with a charming face and a hidden past. She was becoming, step by step, a second life laid over the first life of Helen Talboys. Robert hated the conclusion, but he could not deny it. And with Clara's trust behind him and George's memory before him, he turned away from Brompton and set his face toward the earlier story, the sorrowful story, the story that had begun before Lady Audley was ever Lady Audley at all.

Part 14

Robert went first to Wildernsea, because he now understood that he could not solve the mystery from London. He needed to know when Helen Talboys had truly disappeared from her old life by the sea. Wildernsea was a gray, quiet place, with gray sky, gray water, and gray sand, and it seemed made for forgotten stories and tired people. Robert found Mrs. Barkamb there, a careful elderly woman who remembered Captain Maldon and his daughter very well. She did not speak quickly, but once she began, she told him more than he had hoped.

She said that Helen had tried to support herself after George left for Australia. She gave music lessons and worked hard, but her father took money from her and wasted it in public houses. At last there was a serious quarrel between them. The next morning Helen left Wildernsea suddenly, leaving her little boy out at nurse in the neighborhood. Mrs. Barkamb could not at first remember the exact date, but then she searched among her papers and found an old letter from Captain Maldon, with a note from Helen inside it.

Those letters gave Robert exactly what he needed. They proved that Helen had left Wildernsea in August 1854, and they showed that almost no time lay between that flight and the appearance of Lucy Graham at Mrs. Vincent's school in Brompton. The gap was so small that it could hardly be called a gap at all. Two

lives that had seemed separate were now almost touching. Robert took the letters with him, and though he had found no final confession, the chain of facts seemed stronger than ever.

He walked back to the hotel by the sea with a heavy mind. “I have followed Helen Talboys until she almost disappears,” he thought, “and I have followed Lucy Graham until she almost begins. There is hardly any space left between them.” Still, even now he did not desire punishment for its own sake. He would still have been glad if Lady Audley had fled before he forced the whole truth into the light. He hated the path he was on, but he could no longer leave it.

When he returned to London, he found a letter from Alicia waiting at his chambers. Sir Michael, she said, was much better and very anxious to have him back at the Court. For some strange reason, Lady Audley herself had become eager to know his movements and had been asking light, careless questions about him again and again. Robert sat smoking by the fire with Alicia’s letter in his hand and asked himself the same question over and over. “Why does she not run away?” he thought. “I have warned her clearly enough. Why does she stay?”

At last he decided to give her one more warning, open and plain. He wrote a short letter and sent it toward Audley Court by Phoebe Marks. In that letter he said that if the woman accused were truly Mrs. George Talboys, then there would be no great difficulty in finding someone willing to identify her. Mrs. Barkamb of Wildernsea, he wrote, could throw light on the matter, either to destroy a false suspicion or to confirm it. The letter was very brief, but it said all that was necessary. Robert knew that when Lady Audley read it, she would understand how near he had come.

After sending the letter, he did not stay quietly in London. He went down to Audley Court himself. When he arrived, the old place looked as peaceful as ever, but he no longer saw peace in it. The house, the fish-pond, the dark path of the lime-walk, and the old well beyond the trees now seemed to him like parts of one secret machine, set there long before and waiting for the day when the truth would be forced out of them. Alicia met him with some surprise and watched him with sharp curiosity. She still believed he was under the spell of her stepmother’s

beauty, and she did not yet understand that another, darker tie held him there.

Lady Audley received him with outward calm. She looked bright, graceful, and almost amused, but Robert saw fear beneath the surface. After a few ordinary words, and while Alicia still stood nearby in angry watchfulness, Robert turned to Lady Audley and said, “Will you come into the lime-walk with me? I wish to speak where no one can hear us.” My lady trembled at once. She glanced from side to side like a hunted thing and answered, “Please, not now. I am cold, and I must dress for dinner. Let it be tomorrow.” Robert said very quietly, “No. It must be now.”

She followed him because she had no choice. The early winter evening was already closing in, and the bare branches above the path looked black against the pale sky. The place had the air of a long stone passage in an old church, cold, narrow, and fit for confession. Lady Audley shivered and said, “Why do you bring me to this dreadful place? You know I am nervous.” Robert answered, “Yes, you are nervous. You have reason to be.” Then he turned and faced her fully, not as a cousin speaking to a pretty relation, but as a man who had resolved at last to speak the truth aloud.

He told her that he had been to Wildernsea and had learned what happened there after George Talboys left England. He told her that Helen Talboys had fled from her father’s house in August 1854, and that within two days Lucy Graham had appeared at the Brompton school. He told her that he had seen the old label hidden under the new one on the box, and that the older name had been Mrs. George Talboys. At that, all color left her face. She did not cry out, but she stood looking at him with such terror that even Robert felt pity for her in the middle of his anger.

“You know who you are,” he said. “And now I know it too. You are Helen Talboys. You were George Talboys’s wife. You hid yourself behind a false death, and you buried your old life under another name.” Lady Audley tried to laugh, but the sound died almost at once. She said that he was mad, that he had built some wild story out of chance and fancy, and that he was frightening a weak woman with horrible nonsense. Robert did not move. “If I were wrong,” he said, “you

would not be afraid."

Then her manner changed. She began to beg, not openly for mercy, but for delay. She said that he was cruel, that he had no right to follow her so far, that he did not know what he was doing to Sir Michael. At the sound of that name Robert's own face darkened. "It is for Sir Michael's sake," he answered, "that I gave you warning before. It is for his sake that I tell you now, fly while there is still time. I do not want a public shame if it can be avoided. But I will not fail George Talboys, and I will not leave this matter where it stands." The words were hard, but he forced them out because he believed anything softer would be useless.

For a few moments they stood silent in that dark path, with the quiet water on one side and the hidden well farther on among the trees. Lady Audley no longer pretended not to understand him. Her fear had become too real for that. Yet she had not broken down, and she had not yielded. When they turned back toward the house, Robert knew that the struggle between them was not over. It had only changed. He had at last spoken the truth into her face, and from that hour there could be no return to pretense between them.

Part 15

After Robert's hard talk with Lady Audley in the lime-walk, she did not sink into fear at once. Her first move was quicker and colder than that. She went straight from Alicia to Sir Michael and began to prepare his mind against Robert. She did it with great skill. She did not accuse his nephew of wickedness or insult. Instead, she said something much more dangerous: she said that Robert's mind was giving way, that grief over George Talboys had become one fixed idea, and that he now looked at everything through that one dark thought.

Sir Michael listened with deep distress. He loved Robert sincerely, and the suggestion of madness shocked him almost as much as any accusation against his wife would have done. Lady Audley pressed her advantage carefully. She reminded him that Robert came from an eccentric family, that strange habits may deepen into disease, and that a mind which thinks of one subject too long may

turn it into a kind of false terror. Then she told him, with artful weakness and half-broken words, that Robert had talked of George Talboys being murdered at Audley Court and of searching every tree and brick in the place.

Sir Michael could not believe such a thing easily, but neither could he throw it aside. He said again and again that perhaps Robert had only spoken wildly under strain, yet the seed had been planted. Lady Audley asked only one favor in return for her confidence. She said she could never again bear Robert's presence if he had truly begun to connect her with George Talboys's disappearance. Sir Michael, anxious above all things to protect his beautiful wife from fear, promised that Robert should not trouble her.

Robert knew nothing of this at first. For a little time he remained away, living under the rule of that one fixed purpose which had now mastered him. He heard from Alicia and from others, and at last, toward the end of February, Alicia's urgent letter brought him back to Audley Court. Sir Michael was ill with a low fever after a heavy cold, and Alicia begged her cousin to come at once. The letter struck Robert with a new horror, because he had long feared that the truth, half hidden for the sake of mercy, might one day fall on his uncle too suddenly.

He came down at once and found Sir Michael weak, quiet, and much changed by illness and inward trouble. Robert saw enough in one glance to understand that the blow had already fallen in some form, though not yet publicly and not yet to its furthest extent. Alicia knew very little, but she knew that her father had suffered some grief connected with Lady Audley and that a separation was near. Robert then spoke very seriously to her. He told her that Sir Michael would soon leave Audley Court and that she must go with him, comfort him, and above all avoid all curious questions.

Alicia, shocked and flushed with anger, promised what he asked. Robert was gentler with her than ever before, because he saw that she too had been wounded by events she did not yet understand. He told her that Lady Audley was the cause of her father's sorrow, but gave no details. That was enough. Alicia's strong nature rose at once to her father's side, and Robert knew he could trust her better through ignorance than through knowledge. It was one of the few clear arrangements he

could still make in a house now darkened by secrecy and pain.

For a short time he remained at the Court, moving carefully, saying little, and watching more than ever. Lady Audley also watched him. At tea she could not hide her momentary joy when he said he would leave the next morning, though she disguised it almost at once. Later she questioned him about his long talk with Mr. Dawson, asking what business could possibly pass between two men who were almost strangers. Robert answered with cool evasion, and that evasion alarmed her more than open accusation would have done. She knew now that he was working below the surface and not telling her how much he had learned.

Robert soon left the house itself and went back to Mount Stanning, where he again made the Castle Inn his base. It was a poor place for him, full of drafts, broken fittings, and discomfort, but he preferred it because he could watch from there. Phoebe Marks saw at once that his return might mean danger. She sent a quick secret note by a village boy to Lady Audley, telling her that Robert was again at the inn and asking that the letter be placed in my lady's own hand. Even Phoebe, timid and selfish as she was, understood that the struggle was nearing some decisive point.

Lady Audley received Phoebe that same night. She was deeply glad of the visit, because fear had made her lonely and talkative. With Sir Michael asleep in the next room, she let her maid sit near her and complained openly for once. She said that she was pursued, harassed, and cruelly tormented by a man she had never injured. Phoebe answered in careful half-whispers, for she knew well enough who that man was. The two women, so unlike in station and yet alike in selfishness, sat together in a strange kind of confidence, each bound to the other by fear and secret knowledge.

Then Robert's letter was brought in. Lady Audley tore it open with shaking hands and read the few terrible lines in which Robert named Mrs. Barkamb of Wildernsea as a woman ready and able to identify Mrs. George Talboys if she still lived. The letter was short, but it struck with perfect force. My lady crushed it in her hand and threw it into the fire. For a moment hatred mastered everything else in her. If Robert had stood before her then, she felt she could have killed him. Yet

even in that dreadful passion she did not decide to run away. Poverty, dependence, and the old hard life rose before her again, and she rejected them with desperate pride.

She still had time, and she knew it. She might flee and hide herself once more. But after pacing her rooms and looking out again and again toward the archway, she came to another decision. “No,” she told herself. “I will not go back. If this is a fight to the death, I will not drop my weapon first.” That change in her mind was the true danger. Until then fear had made her think of escape. Now fear and pride together made her think of resistance.

So at last, near midnight, she dressed herself, slipped out secretly, and crossed the quadrangle under the dark archway to meet Phoebe. The night was black and windy. Sir Michael slept inside the house, unaware of what was moving around him. Lady Audley walked quickly, almost fiercely, and when she joined Phoebe outside the gate, she asked at once how far it was to Mount Stanning. “Three miles,” Phoebe answered. “Then we can walk it in an hour and a half,” my lady said. And with that, the two women set out through the dark road toward the Castle Inn.

Part 16

Lady Audley and Phoebe walked through the dark wind toward Mount Stanning. My lady moved quickly, almost fiercely, while Phoebe followed in fear and confusion. The road was black, the air was bitter, and neither woman spoke much. One was driven on by pride and terror; the other by obedience and a growing dread of what might happen before the night ended.

Before leaving the Court, Lady Audley had sat with Phoebe in her room and spoken more openly than she had ever done before. She complained that she was hunted and tormented by Robert Audley, and she let her fear turn into bitter anger. When Robert’s letter arrived naming Mrs. Barkamb of Wildernsea as a possible witness, she tore it open with shaking hands, read it, crushed it, and threw it into the fire. For a little time she thought of flight, but the thought of poverty and the

loss of all she had won drove her back into hardness. She decided not to run. She decided to fight.

So she went out into the night with Phoebe, and from that moment her fear had changed its nature. She was no longer merely shrinking from Robert. She was moving against him. Even then Phoebe did not clearly know what her mistress meant to do, but she felt enough to tremble at every step. My lady's silence itself was frightening, because it no longer sounded like weakness. It sounded like decision.

At the Castle Inn, Luke Marks was already deep in drink and scarcely fit to understand what passed around him. Robert was believed to be sleeping in the room prepared for him upstairs. Lady Audley went into the house and acted with perfect coolness. She knew where Robert's room was, and she believed him safe within it. Then, before leaving, she double-locked the bedroom door. Later Robert himself would remind her of that act in words she could not deny.

She also set the inn on fire. However she arranged the exact means, the purpose was plain enough afterward. Robert was the enemy who had tracked her from the first faint suspicion to the edge of full knowledge, and she believed that if he died that night the whole danger might die with him. It was not only Robert who was at risk. Luke was in the house, helpless with drink, and the servants too might easily have perished. But by then Lady Audley had passed beyond any thought of other lives.

When she and Phoebe were still on the road, they stopped to rest, and Phoebe looked back into the darkness. There, against the black sky, she saw the red light. In a moment she understood that the Castle Inn was burning. Her horror burst out at once. She cried that there would be lives lost, and then, falling to her knees in terror, she begged Lady Audley to tell her that the dreadful thought in her mind was false. She asked directly whether my lady had gone to the inn in order to set it on fire.

Lady Audley gave her no comfort. She called Phoebe mad and cowardly and ordered her to rise. Even then she would neither confess nor soothe. Her answer was cold, hard, and cruel. It told Phoebe everything by refusing to tell her anything.

From that moment the maid understood that the woman she had once admired and envied had become something far more terrible than she had feared.

But the attempt failed. Robert did not sleep in the upstairs room that had been prepared for him. It seemed too damp and smoky, and he had chosen instead to lie on a sofa in a small room on the ground floor. In the middle of the night he woke to the heat and sound of burning wood. Because he woke early enough, and because he kept his head, he was able to give the alarm before the whole house became a trap of fire.

He did more than save himself. He rescued the servant girl and dragged Luke Marks out of the burning building, though Luke was badly burned and nearly died. Robert himself came through the fire singed, bruised, exhausted, and half frozen after the struggle. Yet even in that state he did not stop at mere survival. From Luke and Phoebe he learned who had come to the inn in the dead of night. Phoebe, distracted at seeing him alive, revealed the terrible shape of the truth.

Once Robert understood what had been done, he acted at once. He sent for Doctor Mosgrave, because he now saw that the matter had gone beyond suspicion and into open danger. He no longer needed to wonder whether Lady Audley might be guilty of some hidden crime in the past. She had tried that very night to burn him alive. The struggle between them was finished as a private contest of hints and warnings. It had become an open moral victory for Robert and a complete inward defeat for her, even if the world did not yet know it.

After the fire Robert returned toward Audley Court, worn out from want of sleep and from the labor of the night. Lady Audley, meanwhile, had come back to the Court and waited in dreadful suspense for the news she longed for and feared. She paced the quadrangle, listening for a footstep. She wanted to know whether Robert was dead. The evening darkened, and still she waited under the archway, unable to control herself.

Then at last she heard a man’s step and rushed toward it. When she saw the figure that came through the dim light, she almost fell to the ground with terror. It was Robert Audley, alive, the very man whose bedroom door she had double-locked only seventeen hours before. He found her trembling under the arch and

took her by the arm without ceremony. She made no resistance. She had played her last desperate card, and it had failed.

Robert led her into the house and into the library, where he stood over her with a sternness she had never yet seen fully turned upon her. He told her at once that the Castle Inn had burned and that he had escaped only because he had not slept in the room prepared for him. Then he named her plainly as the incendiary. He said that pity for her was over, though he would still spare public exposure as far as Sir Michael's honor could be spared. Lady Audley crouched before the fire and gave no real answer. She had reached the point where denial itself had become weak.

That night, after all the fear, all the violence, and all the failure, Lady Audley slept soundly. The game, as the story itself says, had been played and lost. Robert had won not because he was brilliant, but because he had been patient and because, at the one moment when murder might have ended everything, chance and clear-headed action had saved him. Now the next step could no longer be delayed. Lady Audley would have to speak, and Robert would have to hear the truth from her own mouth.

Part 17

In the library, Lady Audley sank down by the fire as if all strength had gone out of her body. Robert stood over her and spoke with a cold steadiness that frightened her more than anger would have done. He said, "There was a fire at the Castle Inn last night. The house where I slept was burned down. Do you know how I escaped?" She answered, "No." Then he told her that he had not slept in the room prepared for him, because it was damp and uncomfortable, and that this small change had saved his life.

He went on without pity. He said that the inn had been set on fire by design, that Luke Marks had been dragged out half dead, and that Phoebe had said enough to show who had gone there in the night and why. Robert added that Doctor Mosgrave was already in the neighborhood, and that he himself no longer had any

doubt. “I gave you warning,” he said. “I tried to spare you. But after this I have no mercy left for lies.” Lady Audley did not deny the fire in any strong way. Her silence itself had become almost a confession.

After a little time she looked up and asked the question on which she now tried to rest her whole defense. “Do you think me mad?” she said. Robert answered that madness might explain much, but that murder is not always madness and that fear or wickedness can also drive people to desperate acts. Lady Audley listened, then changed suddenly from fear to a strange bitter calm. “If you will hear me,” she said, “I will tell you everything.” Robert remained where he was, and she began at the beginning of her life.

She said that from her earliest childhood she had known little but poverty and fear. Her father, a naval officer, was poor and seldom with her. She was left in Hampshire under the care of a hard woman who treated her badly when money was late. For years she asked where her mother was and was told only that her mother was away and ill. At last, by chance and anger, the truth came out. Her mother was alive, but shut up in a madhouse. That knowledge filled the child with horror and stayed with her night and day.

She told Robert that when she was ten years old her father came for her and took her away to school. He was deeply shaken when he learned that she knew the secret, and he tried to soften it as much as he could. But the truth could not be softened. She had grown up believing that madness might be waiting for her somewhere in the future, hidden in her blood, ready to rise at some violent moment. Along with that fear came another lifelong bitterness, the bitterness of being poor, dependent, and at the mercy of other people.

As she grew older, she said, she discovered that beauty gave her power. People admired her, forgave her, smiled at her, and gave way to her because she was pretty. That discovery spoiled her. She became vain, selfish, and hungry for comfort, and she learned to think that the world owed her something better than the small, hard life she had known. In that spirit she married George Talboys. She did not say that she had never cared for him at all, but she admitted that she had not been a true or faithful wife in heart. Poverty, marriage, dependence, and a

child only made her feel trapped again.

When George went away to Australia, she was left behind in misery with her child and her father. She hated that life and wanted to escape from it forever. So at Ventnor, with Captain Maldon's help, she let the world believe that Helen Talboys was dead. A false illness, a false death, a grave, a newspaper notice, and silence did the rest. Then she left her old name behind her, placed her child out of sight, and began again as Lucy Graham. From the school in Brompton she passed to Mr. Dawson's house, and from there to Audley Court. At last she married Sir Michael and thought the old life was buried forever.

She told all this rapidly, with little shame and a great deal of bitterness. What hurt her most was not the wrong she had done, but the fear of losing what she had won. Then her voice changed as she came to the last and worst part. George Talboys had returned. He had recognized the portrait, learned enough, and come face to face with her in the grounds. Her false death, her false name, and her fine new life were all suddenly in danger. Robert stood listening without interrupting, but his face grew whiter and harder as the story moved on.

Lady Audley said that on that day in the lime-walk George followed her as far as the old well. She was tired, frightened, and full of furious desperation. They stopped there, near the ruined woodwork and the loose iron spindle. He stood before her, and she felt that he would destroy everything by exposing her. Then, in one terrible moment, what she herself called madness came over her. She seized the loose iron and drew it out, and George Talboys fell with one cry into the black mouth of the well. She listened, but heard no second cry. She looked down and saw only darkness.

When she had finished, Robert recoiled from her. He moved toward the door as if even standing near her had become unbearable. Lady Audley saw that movement and understood it. Yet even then she tried to keep one last kind of power over him. She said that he dared not use this confession in open court, because such a public trial would kill Sir Michael. She added that the law itself could hardly give her a worse punishment than lifelong imprisonment in a madhouse. She did not thank Robert for any mercy, because she knew that his

mercy was really for his uncle, not for her.

Robert made no answer worth calling an answer. He wanted only to get away from her and from the room that now seemed poisoned by what he had heard. But the truth was complete at last. George Talboys was not a wanderer, not a suicide, and not a fugitive from grief. He was dead, and he had died at Audley Court, hidden in the darkness of the old well while the world still spoke of Lady Audley as a bright young beauty and the happy wife of Sir Michael. That knowledge went with Robert out of the library like a weight he could never again put down.

Part 18

Morning came after that dreadful night, but it brought no peace. Robert had won the struggle against Lady Audley, yet the victory felt hateful to him. He had heard too much, guessed more, and still had Sir Michael to think of before all other people. The old man had loved his wife with complete trust, and Robert now saw that the truth, if told without care, might break him more cruelly than any public disgrace. So before he took another step, he made one fixed resolve. He would try, if it could be done honestly, to save his uncle from open shame.

Lady Audley herself had no such calm purpose. After her confession and defeat, she passed into a strange quietness that was almost more alarming than her former fear. She seemed to understand that the game was lost, but she had not become humble. There was still bitterness in her, still pride, and still the dangerous self-command that had carried her so far. Robert knew that he could not trust either her silence or her apparent weakness. Whatever happened next must be arranged quickly and firmly.

He therefore sent for Doctor Alwyn Mosgrave from London. Robert had come to believe that in a matter so dark and so mixed with guilt, terror, falsehood, and hereditary fear, he needed more than his own judgment. A physician who knew the diseases of the mind might help him find some course between cruelty and public scandal. When Dr. Mosgrave arrived, he was exactly the kind of man Robert had hoped for: dry, attentive, passionless, and not likely to be frightened

by strange revelations. Even before a word had been spoken, Robert felt that here at last was someone who could listen without pitying weakness and decide without useless excitement.

Robert began carefully. He first made the doctor promise complete secrecy, and when that was done he told him the history of Lady Audley's early life, her mother's madness, her marriage to George Talboys, the false death at Ventnor, the change of name, and the second marriage at Audley Court. At that stage he still stopped short of the whole horror. He did not immediately speak of George's disappearance or of the fire at the inn. Even now he was trying to see whether the case could be judged from the woman's past and present condition alone. Dr. Mosgrave listened without surprise, almost as if such confessions were among the common burdens of his profession.

But the physician was too experienced to be satisfied with half a truth. He said, in effect, that Robert's face had already told him more than Robert's words had said. If the doctor was to be useful, he must be trusted fully. So, after a long pause and with great reluctance, Robert told the rest: George Talboys had vanished after meeting Lady Audley, and Robert had strong reason to suspect foul play; later, the Castle Inn had been deliberately burned while he slept there, and he believed Lady Audley had tried to kill him. This second telling cost him more than the first, because it brought back the whole weight of George's loss and turned suspicion into moral certainty once again.

When Robert had done, Dr. Mosgrave considered the matter in his calm professional way. He said that Lady Audley was not mad in the simple and total sense. She had intelligence, caution, and self-control. But she carried within her the hereditary taint of mental disease, and under extreme pressure that hidden disorder might break out in violent and dangerous forms. Then he gave the judgment that mattered most. "The lady is not mad," he said in substance, "but she is dangerous." That answer was both less and more terrible than Robert had expected. It denied an easy excuse, yet it also gave a reason why ordinary life with her could never safely continue.

Dr. Mosgrave also spoke very plainly about the law. George Talboys had

disappeared, but there was no body and no court-proof of death. Even if Lady Audley had confessed to Robert, that alone would not safely convict her before the world. Public proceedings would almost certainly fail, while the attempt itself would ruin the name of Audley and drag Sir Michael's private misery into every newspaper and every drawing-room in England. Robert had feared exactly this. When he heard the doctor say that no open prosecution was advisable, he felt not relief exactly, but the painful certainty that private action must now do the work that public justice could not do.

The next question, then, was what to do with Lady Audley. Dr. Mosgrave would not assist in merely hiding crime for convenience, but he was perfectly ready to advise a course that protected society while sparing useless scandal. His conclusion was that she must be removed from Audley Court and placed where she could be watched and controlled for the rest of her life. She was too dangerous to remain free among those she had already deceived and nearly destroyed. Robert understood at once what that meant. Lady Audley could never again live as Sir Michael's admired young wife. The bright false life she had built was over forever.

All this while Sir Michael was suffering in a quieter and more pitiable way than either accusation or anger could show. He had learned enough to know that his wife was not what he believed her to be, and that the marriage on which he had built his late happiness was founded on fraud. Yet he could not bear every detail. He loved her still with that wounded, fatherly tenderness which had marked his love from the first, and that made the blow heavier, not lighter. Robert saw that his uncle's whole nature had been shaken. A proud or violent man might have stormed, denounced, or demanded revenge. Sir Michael only seemed old all at once.

Alicia, meanwhile, was kept as far as possible from the full truth. Robert told her only what was necessary: that her father must be taken away, that Lady Audley had brought deep sorrow into the house, and that questions would do harm. Alicia obeyed him better than he had expected. Her anger against her stepmother remained, but it was now joined to a fierce loyalty toward Sir Michael. She became at once the strong daughter that this broken moment required. Robert was

grateful for that, because he himself had too much else to carry. He could fight for George, and he could arrange practical matters, but he could not at the same time give Sir Michael the daily comfort of a loving child.

By the end of that day, then, the shape of the future had been set. Sir Michael would leave Audley Court. Alicia would go with him. Lady Audley would not be publicly accused, but neither would she remain mistress of the house she had entered under a false name. Robert, standing between them all, felt no triumph in this arrangement. It was only the least terrible path left open. He had not restored George, and he had not made justice shine clearly in the daylight. He had only prevented further destruction and prepared the way for a punishment hidden from the world but final all the same.

So the old house, which had once seemed full of quiet beauty, now held only broken trust and weary duty. The confession had been spoken. The physician had judged. Sir Michael’s happiness had been struck down. Nothing remained now except the last practical act: Robert must take Lady Audley away from England and place her where her beauty, cunning, fear, and violence could do no further harm. That task still lay before him, and it was one he hated more than all that had gone before. But it had to be done.

Part 19

Robert Audley carried out the last painful duty without delay. He took Lady Audley away from England and traveled with her across the Channel toward Belgium, to the quiet foreign town recommended by Dr. Mosgrave. He did not tell her every detail at first. He spoke only as much as was needed to keep her calm and to move her forward. Yet both of them understood that this journey was not an ordinary journey. It was an ending.

Lady Audley bore the outward part of it with strange composure. She was no longer fighting wildly, and she was not begging for pity. At times she seemed almost curious, as if she were watching the ruin of her own life from a little distance. But that calm was not peace. Robert knew too much to trust it, and he

remained grave and watchful from the beginning of the journey to the end.

They reached the foreign house at last, a place called a maison de santé, though Lady Audley understood at once what the softer name meant. “In England we would call it a madhouse,” she said in substance, with bitter clearness, and then turned to the people of the house as if daring them to deny it. No one denied it directly. The woman who received them answered with shrill politeness that it was a very agreeable establishment where one amused oneself. But there was no real comfort in the words, and my lady was not deceived for a moment.

Soon the proprietor came in, smiling, busy, polite, and ready to be pleased with an English gentleman who could pay well. Dr. Mosgrave had already written to him and had given him a short account of the case. Robert, who hated every step of the business, now had to perform the meanest part of all. He had to introduce Lady Audley under a false name. After a moment of painful confusion, he called her Mrs. Taylor, a safe and empty name that seemed to him almost an insult added to a tragedy.

They were then led through the house and up a broad polished staircase to the rooms prepared for her. Money, Dr. Mosgrave had written, should not be spared where the comfort of the English lady was concerned, and the proprietor had acted on that instruction. Yet the result was comfort of a very dreary kind. There was a dark entrance paved in black and white marble, a sad sitting-room heavy with worn velvet, and a bedroom so stiffly arranged that it looked less like a place for rest than a place for burial. Lady Audley looked round those rooms with silent misery. Even the attempt at grandeur only made the place seem colder.

At last she dropped into a chair and covered her face with her hands. The diamonds on her fingers and the whiteness of her hands shone strangely in the dim candlelight, as if the old life still glittered about her while everything real had already been taken away. Robert withdrew into the outer room with the proprietor and finished what had to be said. He explained that the lady had inherited a tendency to madness from her mother, that she had shown dangerous signs under pressure, and that she must be carefully watched. He could not even speak her true name there. All the while he felt that he was closing a door upon a human life

and leaving it shut forever.

When the practical business was done, he returned to her once more. There was no tenderness between them now, and there could not be. He had heard too much and seen too much for that. Yet there was a terrible sadness in the scene, because all violence was over, and what remained was only defeat. Lady Audley did not plead much for freedom. She had already measured the reality before her, and she knew that she was being buried out of sight while still alive. The false bright life of Audley Court had ended in these foreign rooms of stale splendor and locked doors.

Robert then left her. Half an hour later he sat alone at supper in a principal hotel of the town, but he could not eat. The image in his mind was not even that of the woman he had just abandoned to her fate. It was George Talboys. Robert could think only of his lost friend murdered in the dark at Audley Court, hidden so long in the silence of the old well while the world went on carelessly above him. The formal arrangement in Belgium had solved one social problem, but it had not brought Robert any peace.

On the journey back toward Brussels, he looked from the shabby carriage at the flat marshes and the long lines of poplars and felt as if some great piece had been torn out of his own life. For many months he had lived only for this mystery. Now the woman at the center of it was removed, silenced, and shut away. Yet the story was not truly finished. He had not restored George to the living, nor had he even laid him properly among the dead. The thought pressed on him at once. George, if Lady Audley had spoken truth, still lay hidden in the ruined well at Audley Court.

Robert asked himself again and again what he was to tell Sir Michael. Should he speak the full truth, the horrible truth, and say openly what Helen Talboys had confessed? No, he thought, that would be too cruel. Sir Michael’s generous nature would sink under such a blow. But if he softened the truth too much, his uncle might think him needlessly hard toward the woman he had once loved. Between open horror and merciful concealment there seemed no easy path, and Robert, weary as he was, had still to walk that path alone.

So he returned to England not with triumph, but with exhaustion and dread. Lady Audley had been removed from the house where she had ruled as wife and mistress for nearly two years. But George Talboys was still unburied in Robert's imagination, Sir Michael was still waiting for an account he could hardly bear, and the dark story itself still cast shadows forward as well as back. The punishment of Lady Audley had been arranged. The deeper haunting had only begun.

Part 20

Robert Audley came back from Belgium like a man walking in a dream. As the carriage moved through the flat country, he could think only of George Talboys lying, as he believed, hidden in the old well at Audley Court. Lady Audley had been removed, but that did not end the horror. It only changed its shape. Now Robert had to face Sir Michael, and he had to decide what could be told, what must be hidden, and how a murdered friend was to be remembered with honor when no open justice could be safely sought.

The old peace of life did not return to him. The mystery that had driven him for so many months was no longer a mystery in one sense, yet it haunted him more than before. He had once searched in darkness. Now he carried what he believed to be the truth, and that truth followed him everywhere. He felt as if a great piece had been torn out of his own life and as if nothing ordinary would ever again look fully real to him.

Still, practical things had to be done. Sir Michael and Alicia were no longer living at the Court in their old way, and Robert moved between one duty and another with a heavy, sleepless mind. Then, before he could settle anything firmly, another summons came. Luke Marks, terribly burned in the fire at the Castle Inn, was sinking toward death, and the surgeon sent word that he wished to see Robert. Even then Robert did not know what such an interview could bring. He went only because a dying man had called for him and because, in that dark chain of events, Luke had long stood too near the truth to be ignored.

Mr. Dawson led him through the silent village street and into the lane where Luke's mother lived. A pale light shone from the cottage window, the sad kind of light that belongs to sickrooms and watches kept through the night. Robert waited below while the surgeon went upstairs, and then, when the message came that Luke was awake and wished to see him, he climbed softly to the little room. Phoebe sat at the foot of the bed, not looking loving, but terribly anxious. The old mother moved about with broth and cloths in the poor useless way of those who cannot save and therefore busy themselves with small kindnesses.

Luke himself was almost gone, yet his old rough force had not wholly left him. He would not allow Phoebe to whisper first with Robert, and he insisted that whatever he had done he meant now to answer for. Robert tried to calm him and even said that he did not wish to hear anything, but Luke refused that mercy. He said he could not die with a secret on his mind. He had sent for Robert on purpose to tell what he knew, and once he began he spoke with the eager haste of a man racing against his last strength.

First he made his mother remember an evening in the previous autumn, when he had come home from work and found a strange gentleman hidden in their cottage. Robert listened without understanding at first, but then every word became sharp with meaning. Luke said that he had indeed found George Talboys alive. The man had not died in the well. He had climbed or struggled out somehow, hurt and half senseless, and afterward made his way to the cottage. Luke sheltered him there and learned enough to know that some dreadful business lay behind his appearance. Robert, hearing this, felt the whole dark shape of the story begin to change under his feet.

George, Luke explained, had written letters before leaving. He meant to go away under another name and hide himself for a time. Luke himself had helped to send him safely off by the London train. Then Phoebe, who had seen enough from her high window to understand what Lady Audley believed, told her husband that my lady thought George dead at the bottom of the well. From that moment Luke saw his opportunity. If he gave up the letters and told the truth, Phoebe and he would lose the power they held over Lady Audley. If he kept silent, my lady

would continue to fear exposure and would continue to pay. So greed conquered honesty, and he hid both George's survival and the letters that proved it.

He confessed all this with ugly satisfaction mixed with weakness and regret. He said plainly that he had made Lady Audley pay for her pride, her scorn, and every slight she had ever shown him. He had wanted money, a public-house, and the feeling of power over someone far above him. Because she had never treated him kindly, he had withheld the one piece of news that would have eased her terror and perhaps changed the whole later course of events. Robert did not interrupt him. Lecture was useless now, and besides, he was too shaken by the one great fact to waste breath on the lesser wickedness. George Talboys had not been murdered. George Talboys still lived.

When Luke had finished, he lay back exhausted, watching Robert's face as if he expected some grave rebuke. But Robert gave him none. He had passed beyond anger for the moment. The old woman soon fell asleep in her chair, Phoebe slept below, and Luke himself sank at last into a heavy slumber. Robert alone remained awake beside the bed until daylight began to show, unable either to rest or to think of anything except the wonder and mercy of what he had heard. The dead friend for whom he had mourned, avenged, and almost buried in his heart was not dead after all.

Yet with that relief came new uncertainty. Where was George now? Why had no word reached England? Had he seen the advertisements Robert had placed in the Australian papers, or had he gone so far away under his false name that no news could touch him? Robert did not yet know what could be done except to wait and hope. But this one thing was enough for the moment: the black center of the story had shifted. Lady Audley was still guilty of fraud, cruelty, and attempted murder, but not of the one murder she herself had confessed. In that single correction lay the difference between despair and something like hope.

So Robert sat by Luke Marks's bed until long after daybreak, thanking God in his heart for George's preservation and thinking of the message he might one day carry to Clara Talboys. He had once imagined himself bound to tell her that her brother had been murdered and hidden in the darkness of the old well. Now

another sentence rose before him, bright and almost unbelievable after so much grief: “Your brother still lives, and has been found.” That hope did not end the story, but it changed everything that remained.

Part 21

Clara Talboys went back to Dorsetshire with news that changed her father more than anyone would once have thought possible. George Talboys, she said, had not died in September. He had left England alive and had sailed away under another name. It was most likely that he still lived and that one day he would come back. Harcourt Talboys could no longer stand in the proud cold pose he had once taken, because the matter had changed from a mystery about a lost son into a waiting time before a possible return.

He was confused at first, and then, after some effort, became almost natural. He admitted that he had suffered real uneasiness since Robert first came to him with that dark story. He said, more simply than before, that he would be glad to take his son into his arms whenever he returned to England. But one hard question remained. How were they to find George, and how could they tell him that home was open to him again? Robert had advertised in Melbourne and Sydney, but George, traveling under another name, might never have seen those notices.

For a time Robert could think of no better plan than waiting. The great shock and relief of learning that George lived had left him unable to look much farther than that one blessed fact. He had been carrying a dead friend in his heart, and suddenly that burden had been taken away. It is not strange that, after such a change, he could only stand still for a little while and breathe. So, in this state of mind, he accepted Harcourt Talboys’s invitation and went down again to the square red-brick house in Dorsetshire.

The season had changed since his first visit. It was now the middle of April. Primroses and early violets were opening in the hedges, the little streams had broken out from their winter ice, and even the stiff plantation under the black fir-trees looked less severe than before. Robert still slept in the same hard orderly

room, still woke to the same bright sun through the white blinds, and still tried to behave as if cold water and punctual habits were the most natural things in the world. But the house itself had grown easier to him, because one presence in it made everything else light.

That presence was Clara. At first they were quiet and formal together, speaking most freely only of George and the hope of his return. But little by little a warm friendship grew between them. Clara no longer saw Robert as merely a lazy friend of her brother. She began to take him seriously, and, because she took him seriously, she scolded him. She told him plainly that he had wasted his life, that he had talent enough to do better work, and that a man with mind, health, and opportunity had no right to drift in idleness through the world.

Robert, who would once have laughed at such lectures or escaped them, found them sweeter than praise. He spoke badly of himself with cheerful readiness, but in his heart he loved every serious word that came from her. It was delicious to him to let her think him weak and useless, because it gave him the chance to hint that under better guidance, with a true purpose before him, he might perhaps become another kind of man. He talked gloomily about his cigars, his French novels, and the emptiness of his bachelor life, while in secret he had already begun to imagine a very different future.

Clara, of course, understood none of this at first. She answered him with complete honesty and said that he ought to read, work, and build a real career. She asked nothing romantic from him. She wanted him to be useful, steady, and worthy of respect. That very plainness of mind only drew him nearer to her, for he saw that she cared little for fine speeches and much for character. Every morning walk, every talk in the garden, every serious discussion made him more certain that he loved her and that life would never again be enough without her.

Yet, being Robert Audley, he still delayed. He feared to speak and feared even more to hear a refusal. So he let the days pass until at last he had stayed nearly five weeks and felt that he could not remain longer without becoming ridiculous even in his own eyes. One pleasant morning in May he packed his portmanteau and announced that he must return to London. Harcourt Talboys took the news

with more friendliness than Robert had once believed possible and invited him to come again in the autumn for shooting. Robert answered warmly enough, but his eyes went more than once toward Clara, who lowered hers and blushed a little, though she said nothing.

All that day he was poor company. The thought of leaving made him restless and low-spirited. Evening came, and after dinner Harcourt Talboys shut himself in the library with his lawyer and a tenant farmer. Robert then found himself alone with Clara in one of the long drawing-room windows while the light faded outside and the sky turned deeper rose and purple over the quiet land. They began, as so often before, by speaking of George. Clara said sadly that she could not understand how her father could remain so patient. If she had been a man, she said, she would have gone to Australia herself to look for her brother and bring him home if he still lived.

Those words brought Robert to the point where silence became impossible. He laid his hand on her arm and asked, “Shall I go to look for your brother?” Clara turned quickly and looked at him through tears. She said she could never ask such a sacrifice from him. Then he answered with all the feeling he had been hiding so long. He said that no sacrifice would seem too great if it were made for her, that he would cross all Australia for George if she wished it, and that he would count the labor nothing if, when he came back, she would thank him and welcome him.

At last the truth came out fully. Robert told her that he loved her, that he had come to love her more deeply every day, and that he would go on loving her whether she accepted him or not. He even dropped awkwardly to his knees and covered one little hand he had found among the folds of her dress with kisses. Clara drew the hand away, but not in anger. For one moment it rested lightly on his dark hair. When he then asked again, very softly, “Shall I go to Australia for your brother?” she did not answer in words, and her silence told him more than speech would have done. Then he asked one question more, bold at last because love had already carried him too far to retreat. “Shall we go together,” he said, “as husband and wife, and bring him home between us?”

A little later Harcourt Talboys entered the lamplit room and found Robert alone.

He then had to hear a revelation which surprised him perhaps even more than the news that George was alive. The master of the house had imagined that the great attraction of Dorsetshire was his own orderly way of life. He now learned that his guest had been drawn there by something much stronger. Even so, he took the news with reasonable calm and gave his consent in his stiff, measured fashion. So Robert left Dorsetshire not only happier than he had ever been before, but also bound by a fresh and tender duty.

He went back to London to give up his chambers, settle his affairs, and make inquiries about ships sailing from Liverpool for Sydney in June. It was Saturday evening when he let himself into Figtree Court again. Mrs. Maloney was on the stairs with soap and water, filling the passage with steam, and she told him at once that a gentleman had called many times and was waiting now in the sitting-room. Robert opened the door, expecting almost anyone rather than the one man seated there in the fading yellow light beside the canaries and the geranium leaves. The visitor rose, and Robert gave a great cry of joy. George Talboys was before him at last.

The meeting between the two friends needed no grand speeches at first. They had both suffered too much and longed too deeply for one another's presence. When words came, Robert told what he could in the gentlest way. He touched very lightly on the most painful matters and said as little as possible about the woman who had lived under so many names and now wore a false one forever in a quiet Belgian town. George too spoke briefly of the past. He said that on that bright September day he had gone to accuse his false wife, and that even after she had thrown him into the well, his first thought had been not revenge but her safety.

He then explained what had happened. He had fallen not onto stone, but into deep mud and wet filth at the bottom, though the side of the well had bruised him and broken one arm. For a short time he had been stunned. Then, feeling that the air below was deadly, he forced himself to climb. The stones were rough, and by pressing feet and back against the sides and helping himself as well as he could with one good hand, he slowly worked his way upward. It took long, painful effort, but at last he reached the top. Since daylight still remained, he hid among the

laurel bushes until dark, then escaped and made his way to the cottage where Luke Marks found him. From there, the rest Robert already knew.

George had not truly gone back to Australia after all. He had first taken passage, but afterward changed his plan and sailed instead to New York, where he lived quietly under another name. He had money enough to support himself modestly, and he might have made friends there if he had wished, but grief kept him apart from others. He carried, as he said, the old bullet in his breast. He longed not for strange company, but for England, for old affection, and above all for Robert's hand and Robert's voice. At last the loneliness became too much for him, and he came home.

So the man for whom Robert had mourned, searched, suffered, and nearly ruined others in the search was restored to him in life and speech and friendship. George was alive. Clara's brother was alive. Harcourt Talboys's son was alive. And Robert, who had entered his chambers in the twilight expecting only letters and stale rooms and the smell of soap on the stairs, found instead the friend whose loss had changed his whole nature sitting quietly before him as if returned out of the dead. The darkest part of the story was over now. What remained was not tragedy, but settlement, healing, and the slower peace that comes after long distress.

Part 22

Two years passed after the May evening when Robert Audley found George Talboys alive again in his rooms in the Temple. By that time Robert's old dream of a pretty cottage had come true. Between Teddington Locks and Hampton Bridge, hidden among trees and green leaves, there stood a small fanciful house of wood, with lattice windows looking out over the river. On the sloping bank near the water, a brave boy of eight played among the lilies and reeds while a nurse held a little child in her arms. The older boy was Georgey Talboys, and the smaller child was Robert and Clara's baby.

Robert Audley had changed more than anyone might once have believed

possible. He was now doing real work and beginning to rise in his profession. People spoke well of him on the circuit, and he had even made the court laugh by the clever way he handled a famous breach-of-promise case. He was still kind, still easy in manner, and still very much himself, but the old useless drifting life was gone. Love, grief, friendship, and duty had made a man of him.

Georgey no longer lived always by the river, because he had gone to school; but he came often to the cottage to see his father. George Talboys lived there too, with his sister Clara and her husband Robert. The old friendship between the two men had become stronger than ever after all they had suffered. George was not fully healed from the past, but he was peaceful and safe at last. In that quiet house by the water, he could live among people who loved him and asked no hard questions.

Other visitors came often to the cottage. One was a bright, warm-hearted young woman, Alicia Audley, who had grown happier and softer through sorrow. Another was Sir Michael, now gray-bearded and older, but gentler than ever. He had survived the great trouble of his life and had borne it with patience and Christian strength. Robert and Clara welcomed him with special tenderness, because they knew what had been taken from him and how bravely he had endured it. Time had not made him forget, but it had taught him how to live quietly with his pain.

More than a year earlier, a letter with a black edge had come from abroad. It announced the death of a certain Madame Taylor at Villebrumeuse, after a long illness. That was the end of Lady Audley. She died far away from the house in which she had once seemed so bright, so admired, and so secure. Robert said little about that letter, and the others said less. Her story ended not in noise, but in distance, silence, and slow decline.

Another cheerful visitor came often in that happy summer: Sir Harry Towers. He was open-hearted, generous, and excellent with children, boats, and outdoor pleasures of every kind. When he was at Teddington, the little Swiss boathouse and landing-stage were never empty for long. In the evenings the gentlemen smoked above the water, and then Clara and Alicia called them down to tea and

strawberries and cream on the lawn. Alicia was soon to become Lady Towers, and Sir Michael planned afterward to live near her in Hertfordshire.

Audley Court itself stood empty. A hard old housekeeper ruled there now, and the great rooms were shown to curious visitors. A curtain hung over the painted portrait of Lady Audley, and dust and mold slowly gathered in the shut-up rooms where her laughter had once sounded so brightly. People came to ask about the fair-haired lady who had died abroad, and they looked at her rooms with idle curiosity. But Sir Michael had no wish ever to live there again, for too much false happiness and too much sorrow had been joined to that old house.

George Talboys was still a young man, and those who loved him hoped that one day the shadow of the past might fade entirely from his life. It was not impossible that, in time, he might even learn to love again. Robert's old cigars and careless bachelor habits were gone, and the people who had served him faithfully were not forgotten. Mrs. Maloney had her small pension, and life, which had once seemed broken beyond repair, had quietly joined itself together again. So the good people in this story were at last left happy and at peace, and that is no bad ending for a tale that passed through so much darkness.