

AI-Generated Graded Readers

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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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Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (Simplified Edition, Adapted and Simplified by ChatGPT)

Part 1

This is the story of a woman's long pain and a man's strong purpose. I will begin it myself, because I was there at the start, and because what happened that night changed my whole life. Before then, I was an ordinary drawing teacher in London. I had my work, my rooms, my friends, and my visits to my mother and sister. After that night, everything moved in a new direction.

My name is Walter Hartright. At that time I was twenty-eight years old, and I lived in London. My father had also been a drawing teacher, and after his death I had continued in the same work. My mother and my sister Sarah lived quietly in a cottage at Hampstead, and I went to see them two evenings every week. In those days I was not in very good health, and I also had less money than I wished. The hot summer in London had made me tired in body and mind.

On the last day of July, I left my rooms in the evening and walked north to Hampstead. The air in the city felt heavy, and even the noise of the streets seemed weak and far away. I remember that I was dull and restless, and that I wanted open air more than anything else. When I reached my mother's cottage, the light was already fading over the heath. I had hardly touched the bell when the door flew open.

The man who opened it was not the servant. It was my little Italian friend, Professor Pesca. He rushed at me with great joy, caught both my hands, and almost pulled me into the house. Pesca was one of the strangest and warmest people I had ever known. He was very small, very lively, and full of feeling. He loved England with the wild love of a man who had found safety in a foreign land.

Years before, he had left Italy for political reasons and had made a modest life for himself in London as a teacher of languages. He wore English clothes with pride, carried an umbrella like any English gentleman, and tried all our national sports with more courage than skill. Once, at Brighton, he had nearly drowned

while bathing in the sea. I had dived down, pulled him up, and helped save his life. From that day, he had declared again and again that his life belonged to me, and that he would never rest until he had done me some great service.

My mother liked him deeply, because she saw how true his affection for me was. My sister Sarah respected him, but she never felt as easy with him as my mother did. She thought him too familiar and too sudden in his ways. So when we all entered the parlour together, my mother was laughing, but Sarah was picking up the broken pieces of a teacup that Pesca had knocked from the table in his excitement. This difference between them showed itself often. My mother grew younger in happy company, while Sarah was young in years but careful and correct in manner.

Pesca, however, noticed nothing. He pulled a large armchair to the middle of the room, turned it around, climbed onto it on his knees, and announced that he had wonderful news. Then he began one of his long, dramatic speeches. Earlier that day, he said, he had been teaching Italian to three young ladies in a rich house in Portland Place. Their father had entered the room with a letter from a friend in the country. This friend needed a good drawing-master to come and stay at his house for several months.

The moment Pesca heard those words, he said, he had thought of me. He had praised me with all his strength and had insisted that I was the very man for the post. The rich father had asked whether I was respectable, whether I could show letters about my character and skill, and whether I could be trusted. Pesca had answered every question with great heat and certainty. At last the man had written down the terms and had told Pesca to bring them to me.

When the speech ended, Pesca waved the paper over his head as if he had won a battle. My mother was delighted. Sarah, though calmer, was also pleased for my sake. I took the paper and read it. It said that Mr. Frederick Fairlie of Limmeridge House, in Cumberland, wanted a drawing-master for four months. The man chosen would teach two young ladies water-colour painting, and would also spend his free time repairing and arranging a neglected collection of drawings. He would be paid four guineas a week, live in the house, and be treated like a gentleman.

It was, by any reasonable measure, a very good offer. The season suited me, the money was generous, and the work sounded pleasant. Yet the moment I finished reading, I felt a strange dislike to the idea of going. I could not explain it. My duty said yes, but something inside me held back and said no. I had never before felt such a sharp divide between good sense and feeling.

My mother could not understand me. She said my father would have thought such a chance a blessing. Sarah said I ought to be grateful and proud. Pesca almost cried out in pain at my hesitation. He reminded me that I needed money, that I needed country air, and that this was the very chance both to earn and to recover my health. He also begged me not to hurt him by refusing the first real service he had ever been able to do for me.

Their words were sincere, affectionate, and impossible to resist for long. Though my unwillingness did not leave me, I was ashamed of it. At last I gave way. I promised to send my papers and to do what was needed. The rest of the evening passed more lightly. We joked about Cumberland, about the two young ladies, and about the new life that might be waiting for me there. But even while I smiled, some hidden part of me remained uneasy.

The next morning I sent my testimonials to the address in Portland Place. A few days later, an answer came. Mr. Fairlie accepted my services and asked me to travel north without delay. So the thing was settled. On the evening before my departure, I went once more to my mother's cottage to say goodbye. The day had been close and hot, and the night was heavy with summer air.

We talked so long that it was almost midnight when I finally left the house. Instead of going straight back to London, I chose the longer road across the heath. I wanted the cooler air, and I did not want to return too quickly to my narrow rooms and sleepless thoughts. The moon was full above the open ground, and the heath looked lonely, pale, and almost wild in its light. For a time, I walked quietly and let the stillness calm me.

But when I came off the heath and into a darker road, my thoughts turned again to the journey before me. I began to imagine Limmeridge House, Mr. Fairlie, and the two ladies I was going to teach. Soon I reached the point where several roads

met. I turned toward London and walked on, still thinking idly about the unknown household. Then, in one instant, every drop of blood in my body seemed to stop.

A hand had touched me lightly on the shoulder from behind. I turned at once. There, in the white moonlight of the empty road, stood a woman dressed all in white. It was as if she had risen out of the earth before me. Her face was pale and young, thin in shape, with large serious eyes and uncertain lips. Her manner was not wild and not bold. It was quiet, nervous, and sad.

She asked me, in a low quick voice, whether that was the road to London. I stared at her for a moment before I answered, because her sudden appearance had greatly startled me. She seemed frightened that I might suspect her of some wrong. I told her I did not suspect her, and that I only wondered how she had come there so suddenly. Then she explained that she had hidden by the roadside and waited until I passed, because she wanted first to see what kind of man I was.

There was something so lonely and helpless in her that my pity rose at once. She said she had met with an accident, that she was very unfortunate in being alone so late, and that she wanted only to reach London and find a friend there. If I would help her get a cab, and if I would promise not to interfere with her and to let her leave me whenever she wished, she asked for nothing more. She repeated that request more than once, with such anxiety that I could see fear had a strong hold on her mind.

I tried to question her a little, but she would tell me very little. She asked whether I knew many men of rank and title, and then whether I knew any baronets. There was suspicion in her voice when she spoke of them. When I said I was only a drawing-master, not a gentleman of rank, she seemed relieved and said that she could trust me. She also hinted that a baronet had wronged her cruelly, but when I tried to ask more, she begged me to be silent.

Then, as we walked on together toward London, another strange thing happened. When I told her that I was leaving town the next day for Cumberland, she repeated the name with deep feeling. She said she had once been happy there. More than that, she said she knew Limmeridge village and Limmeridge House. She spoke warmly of Mrs. Fairlie, who was dead, and of the family connected

with that house. This surprised me greatly, because I myself was on my way to that very place.

By then we had reached the more settled road near the turnpike and the gas lamps. She grew even more restless there. She said she wanted to shut herself inside a carriage and be driven away. At last I saw a cab stop at a house, and when it was free I called to it. The driver said he would only go as far as Tottenham Court Road, because his horse was tired, but that was enough for her. She hurried into the cab before I could say much more.

I asked her to let me see her safely to her friend's door, but she refused strongly. She reminded me of my promise not to interfere. Then, just before the cab door closed, she took my hand, kissed it suddenly, and thanked me again and again. The cab moved away at once. I stepped into the road, half wanting to stop it, but not knowing on what right I could do so. In another moment it was gone into the darkness, and the woman in white was gone with it.

Part 2

I stood in the road after the cab had gone, still looking into the dark as if I might call her back by waiting there. My thoughts were in complete disorder. I did not know whether I had done a kind thing or a foolish thing. I could not decide whether she was in danger, or whether others were in danger from her. While I was still trying to understand what had happened, I heard wheels coming quickly behind me.

A light open carriage passed me and stopped a short distance ahead. Two men were in it. One of them called to a policeman on the other side of the road and asked if he had seen a woman pass that way. At first he described her dress wrongly, but the second man corrected him at once. He said, "No, in white. She went away in white." Then the first man gave the policeman a card and said, "If you find her, stop her and send her carefully to this address." The policeman asked what she had done, and the answer came back in words I could not forget: "She has escaped from my asylum."

Those words turned cold inside me. Until that moment I had thought she might be only frightened, or deeply troubled, or shaken by some recent shock. I had seen nothing wild enough in her face or voice to make me believe she was truly mad. Now that new idea fell on me all at once. Had I helped an innocent woman escape from cruel imprisonment? Or had I let loose upon London a poor creature who could not guide her own actions? The question came too late, and it stayed with me like a weight on my heart.

When I reached my rooms, sleep was impossible. I tried to sketch. I tried to read. Each time the woman in white came back before my eyes. I wondered where she had stopped the cab, whether she had found the friend she spoke of, and whether the men in the chaise had found her again. I had only a few hours left before my journey north, and at last I was almost glad when morning came. Movement seemed better than sitting still with my thoughts.

My train was to take me first to Carlisle and then on by a branch line toward the coast. Even the journey began badly. The engine broke down, and I missed the connection I had been meant to take. By the time I reached the little station nearest Limmeridge House, it was already late, and the night was very dark. A pony-chaise waited for me, but the driver was clearly unhappy at the delay, and he drove in stiff silence. The road seemed long, rough, and empty, and I heard the sea before I saw anything of the house.

At last we passed through gates and along a gravel drive, and I was taken into a large quiet dining-room where a cold supper had been left for me. I was too tired and too low in spirit to eat much. A solemn servant waited on me as if I were a guest of great importance, though I felt only like a lonely man who had arrived too late. Soon I was shown up to my room. Before I put out the candle, I remember wondering whether I would dream of the woman in white or of the unknown people whose house I had entered.

The next morning changed everything at once. When I raised the blind, I saw the sea shining under the August sun and the distant Scottish coast blue on the horizon. After London, it looked like another world. The confusion of the last days seemed already to grow dim in my mind. Even the woman in white, though not

forgotten, felt for a time farther away. The clear air, the light on the water, and the great space before me gave me a sudden sense of beginning again.

When I went down to breakfast, a servant showed me into a long bright room. There I saw a lady standing at the far window with her back turned toward me. Before she moved, I was struck by the beauty of her figure, by the easy grace of her posture, and by the strength and lightness of her body. But when she turned and came nearer, my first expectation gave way to surprise. Her face was dark, strong, and almost severe. Her mouth and jaw were firm, her eyes quick and bright, and there was more power than softness in her look.

Yet the moment she spoke, that first surprise changed. Her voice was clear and pleasant, and her manner was open, quick, and perfectly natural. She welcomed me without the least shyness and said at once that she was one of my pupils. Then she laughed and added that we might as well shake hands immediately instead of standing on ceremony. In another woman such freedom might have seemed careless. In her it seemed only honest, lively, and strong. This was Marian Halcombe.

We sat down together, and she began talking with an easy flow that made silence impossible. She told me that her sister was in her room with a slight headache, that their old companion Mrs. Vesey was with her, and that Mr. Fairlie, the master of the house, lived apart like an invalid king in his own rooms. She explained that she and Miss Fairlie were in truth half-sisters, not full sisters, and that she herself had little money while Laura Fairlie had a fortune. Then, with cheerful boldness, she described herself as dark and ugly, and her sister as fair and lovely. She did not seem troubled by the contrast. She only found amusement in stating it plainly.

The more she spoke, the more I felt that she was unlike any woman I had known. She had intelligence, courage, and self-command in every look and movement. At the same time, she was not cold. She cared deeply for her sister, and every light word she spoke had real feeling under it. She said that I must please both of them or neither of them, because she and Laura could not live happily apart. She also warned me, laughing, that I would have very quiet days at

Limmeridge. In the morning I would work on Mr. Fairlie's drawings. After lunch, Miss Fairlie and Miss Halcombe would go out sketching with me. In the evenings, there would be music, games, and talk, but very little company from outside.

I answered as well as I could, though I was still taking the measure of her. Then she asked, in her playful way, whether I could bear such a peaceful life, or whether I secretly longed for change and adventure. That one word, "adventure," brought me back sharply to the night road near London. I told her that, if I had ever longed for adventure, I had had enough to satisfy me for some time. She saw at once that I was serious and asked me to explain. When I said that the person at the center of the matter had spoken of the late Mrs. Fairlie with gratitude and affection, her whole face changed, and she leaned toward me with instant attention.

So I told her the story from the beginning: my walk home across the heath, the touch on my shoulder, the woman in white, the questions about London and baronets, the mention of Limmeridge House, the cab, and finally the words spoken by the men in the chaise. Miss Halcombe listened with steady eyes from first to last. She did not cry out, and she did not waste words. When I finished, she asked only the exact questions that mattered. Was I sure the woman had named Limmeridge? Was I sure she had spoken warmly of Mrs. Fairlie? Had I learned her name? When I said no to the last question, Miss Halcombe admitted that I had probably done right in helping the poor creature, because nothing in my account sounded violent or wicked.

But the mystery, she said, must be cleared up. She believed the woman had once known their mother, and she advised me not to speak yet either to Mr. Fairlie or to Miss Fairlie herself. There was sense in this, and I agreed. Then, after one more quick thoughtful look at me, she rose from the table and said that I had better see my employer next. In that moment I felt that my life at Limmeridge had truly begun. Yet even in the bright morning room, with the sea outside and Marian Halcombe before me, the shadow of the woman in white had not left me.

Part 3

Before I could say more to Miss Halcombe, a servant came with a message from Mr. Fairlie. He wished to see me at once. She told me to wait in the hall for a moment, and then said that she would spend the morning searching through her mother's old letters. If there was any clue to the woman in white, she believed it might be found there. I left her with that promise in my mind and followed the servant.

Mr. Fairlie received me in a room that seemed made for weakness, luxury, and complaint. The curtains softened the light, the carpets deadened every step, and everything about him suggested nerves, illness, and selfish ease. He spoke in a weak, fine voice and treated me with a kind of polite contempt which was harder to bear than open rudeness. He wanted his drawings handled carefully, his comfort disturbed in no way, and his peace protected above all else. Before I left him, I had already decided that I would never enter his rooms again unless I was forced to do so.

Back in my little studio, I spent the rest of the morning arranging the neglected drawings and trying to settle myself to work. But as the hour for luncheon came nearer, I felt more and more restless. Miss Halcombe had promised me two things without directly promising them. One was that she would continue her search into the mystery of Anne Catherick. The other was that I should at last be introduced to Miss Fairlie. The second expectation soon drew all my thoughts to itself.

At luncheon I found Miss Halcombe with an elderly lady named Mrs. Vesey, who had once been Miss Fairlie's governess. Mrs. Vesey was one of those mild, harmless people who seem made for quiet corners and soft chairs. She had no sharp edge anywhere in her nature. She smiled gently, moved slowly, and appeared so calm that it was almost hard to imagine her ever having been young. Yet for all her goodness, she seemed to make no strong mark on anything around her.

Miss Fairlie did not appear at table. Miss Halcombe, who noticed every look, told me at once that her sister was better but had not yet come down. Then she took a parasol, led me out into the garden, and said that she thought she could find my missing pupil there. As we crossed the lawn, she told me that the morning's

search through the letters had not yet given her any clear answer about Anne Catherick. Still, she had not lost hope. She said that when a woman gives herself to a mystery, the mystery cannot remain hidden forever.

We turned into a path through the shrubs and came to a small summer-house. There, standing by a rustic table, with a little sketch-book under her hand, was Miss Fairlie. She was looking out through an opening in the trees toward the distant hills and open country beyond. For a moment I saw only her figure, the soft white dress, the fair hair, and the light quiet grace of her whole person. Then she turned, and I saw her face clearly. It was one of those faces that seem to carry light with them.

I have never found it easy to describe Laura Fairlie, because the memory of her face is mixed forever with all that came after. She was fair without being weak, delicate without looking small, and beautiful in a way that did not depend on one feature alone. Her eyes were clear and blue, her expression open and kind, and her whole face had the freshness of a young life that had not yet learned distrust. But even in that first meeting, something troubled me. There was, behind all the charm and sweetness, some strange sense of incompleteness which I could not explain.

The effect of her presence made me awkward in a way that surprised even myself. Miss Halcombe saw it and at once took the burden of conversation into her own hands. Laughing, she pointed to the sketch-book and said that at last I had found the perfect pupil, because Miss Fairlie had hurried to her drawing the moment she heard that her new master was in the house. Laura laughed too and answered that she was not eager but afraid. She said she had been turning over her sketches like a child looking again at lessons she feared might prove poor.

There was so much truth and simplicity in her that nothing she said sounded like empty politeness. When Miss Halcombe declared that the sketches must be judged, whether good or bad, Laura accepted it at once, though with a little modest fear. We left the summer-house together, and while we walked she said that she hoped I would pay her no compliments. When I asked why, she answered in the most natural way possible, "Because I shall believe everything you say." In those

few words she showed the deepest part of her nature. She trusted because she herself was true.

We drove out that afternoon with the sketch-books, and later in the day we met again in the drawing-room. There was music, light talk, and that easy quiet which belongs only to country houses in happy weather. More than once I found myself watching Laura without meaning to do so. There was no boldness in my attention and no conscious purpose in it. I only felt, more and more strongly, that I was in the presence of a nature all gentleness, purity, and innocent confidence.

That evening, however, brought the strangest moment of the day. Miss Halcombe had at last found what she needed among her mother's letters. She took me aside and read to me a passage about a little girl named Anne Catherick, who had once come to the school at Limmeridge. The child had been slow in mind, gentle in manner, and very grateful for kindness. Mrs. Fairlie, noticing that white suited her better than any other colour, had given her some of Laura's old white dresses. On hearing this, the child had kissed her hand and said that she would always wear white as long as she lived, so that she might remember and still please the lady who had been good to her.

While Miss Halcombe read those words, Laura passed near us in the moonlight outside. She wore white, as Anne had once worn it. Then the whole strange chain seemed to close at once. The woman I had met on the road, dressed from head to foot in white, was no unknown creature to Limmeridge after all. She was Anne Catherick, Mrs. Fairlie's old pupil. More than that, the likeness I had felt without understanding now became suddenly clear. Laura and Anne were alike.

We said little for a moment after that discovery. The thing was too strange and too serious to meet with easy words. Miss Halcombe decided at once that the matter must be kept secret for the present. At the first safe chance, she would lead her sister to speak of old days and of Anne Catherick, and we would see what Laura herself remembered. That was wise, and I agreed. Yet, for all our new knowledge, the mystery was still far from solved.

In the days that followed, we learned only a little more. Laura remembered Anne vaguely as a child who had once been at the school and who had been

thought to resemble her. She knew that Anne had later returned to Hampshire with her mother, but nothing beyond that. No further letter gave us a clear answer. So our discovery stopped there. We had found a name for the woman in white, and a reason for her dress, but not the meaning of her fear, her flight, or her warning.

Time moved on quietly at Limmeridge. The days slipped by in work, lessons, walks, music, and long soft evenings. Everything around me was peaceful, and yet something in my own heart was beginning to change. I knew it before I admitted it. I felt it before I named it. Among the calm hours of that house, with Laura Fairlie before me almost every day, my fate was moving toward me without noise.

Part 4

After that first strange day at Limmeridge, life seemed to settle into a calm pattern. Miss Halcombe and I kept the secret of Anne Catherick's likeness to Laura. We tried, when we could, to learn more from old letters and from Laura's memory, but nothing clear came. We knew Anne's name, we knew that Mrs. Fairlie had once been kind to her, and we knew why white clothes had become important to her. Beyond that, the mystery remained closed.

The days passed, and then the weeks passed. Autumn moved slowly over the grounds, and the trees changed little by little from summer green to richer and softer colours. Our life at the house was very quiet. In the mornings I worked alone on Mr. Fairlie's drawings, and in the afternoons and evenings I was almost always with the two sisters. It was a peaceful life, and that peace was my danger.

I do not hide the truth from myself now, and I will not hide it here. I loved Laura Fairlie. I had not meant to love her, and I had not even believed myself capable of such folly in my position. For years I had done my work among young ladies, kept my manners careful, my feelings under control, and my thoughts within safe limits. With her, all that discipline failed me.

It was not one single moment that changed me. It was the whole slow habit of daily life. I was near her when she painted, near her when she asked questions,

near her when she listened, near her when she played music in the evening. Her voice, her hands, the turn of her head, the clear truth in her eyes, the simple way she trusted whatever was kind and honest, all worked upon me together. Before I fully knew my danger, I was already in it.

I ought to have checked myself at once. I ought to have remembered who I was and what she was. I ought to have asked myself why one room became bright when she entered it and empty when she left it, why every little change in her dress or manner fixed itself in my mind, and why her touch when we shook hands in the morning or at night stayed with me so long after the moment had passed. But I asked nothing while there was still time to be safe. I drifted on and let my heart go where it pleased.

So matters continued until nearly the end of the third month of my stay. Then the warning came, and it came not from myself, but from Laura. No word had passed between us that could have betrayed me. Yet when we met one morning, I saw at once that she knew, and that in learning my secret she had found her own trouble too. She became kinder in little ways before others were present, but whenever we were left alone she grew constrained, sad, and anxious to turn quickly to anything that might help her hide herself.

There was something more in the change than pity for me. Her hand had grown colder, her face more still, her whole manner more troubled. It was not the calm distance of a woman who feels nothing. Nor was it any free confession of feeling. It was the silent pain of a true and innocent nature that had discovered danger too late and blamed itself for what it had never meant to feel. I saw all this without daring to speak of it, and Miss Halcombe saw it too.

From that time Miss Halcombe watched us both with sharper eyes than ever. She said nothing at first, but her looks followed me. Sometimes there was anger in them, sometimes fear, and sometimes a deep concern that I could not mistake. A week passed in this secret suffering. At last she decided for all three of us what I had not had the courage to decide for myself. She spoke, and she spoke as plainly as only she could.

One morning she was absent from her usual place at breakfast. Laura was

outside on the lawn and would not come in while I was alone. I stayed in the breakfast-room, she stayed in the garden, and each of us waited for someone else to join us. When Miss Halcombe entered, she looked thoughtful and unlike herself. Soon after, Laura came in too, pale and nervous, and almost at once Miss Halcombe mentioned some arrangements for Monday and for a room in the house that was to be prepared. I did not then fully understand her meaning, but I felt trouble in every word.

After breakfast Miss Halcombe asked me if I had a little time before beginning my work. She said she wished to speak to me privately and led me to the summer-house where Laura and I had first met. There she sat down, looked directly at me, and began by saying that she had come to feel a strong friendship and respect for me. Because of that friendship, she said, she would not waste words or cover the truth. She had discovered my secret.

I did not deny it. There was no use in denying anything to her. She told me that Laura too had suffered since she first understood what had grown between us. Then she said the hardest thing with great kindness. Laura's engagement, she explained, was an engagement of honour, not of love. Her father had approved it on his deathbed two years before. She had neither warmly welcomed it nor strongly resisted it. She had accepted it quietly, as many women do, believing that affection might come later.

Miss Halcombe said that, until I came to Limmeridge, Laura had been calm. Now that calm was broken, and only absence and time could help her. She trusted my honour, she said, enough to believe I would do what was right. I asked only what apology I should make to Mr. Fairlie and when I ought to go. She answered with practical sense at once. I must not leave that very day, because Mr. Fairlie would be suspicious. I was to wait, ask release from my post on Friday morning, finish what I could in order, and leave on Saturday.

I had just accepted this, and we were about to return to the house, when Laura's maid came hurrying to the summer-house and asked to speak with Miss Halcombe. They moved aside for a moment, and I stood there alone, feeling that the life I had lived in that house was already over. When Miss Halcombe came back, she looked

uneasy. Laura, she said, had received a letter that morning and was greatly agitated by it. We walked quickly back toward the house together.

As we went, I forced myself to ask the question that had been burning in me since breakfast. Who was the man Laura was to marry? Miss Halcombe answered first that he was a gentleman of large property in Hampshire. The name of Hampshire struck me at once, because Anne Catherick had come from there. I pressed further and asked for his name. "Sir Percival Glyde," she said. I stopped short and asked, with an agitation I could no longer hide, whether he was a knight or a baronet. "A baronet, of course," she answered. At that moment the strange question Anne had put to me on the road came back with terrible force, and I felt, for the first time, that some dark thread was binding all these events together.

Part 5

We had scarcely reached the house after that talk when another trouble came upon us. I had been at work with Mr. Fairlie's drawings for no more than half an hour when there was a knock at my door, and Miss Halcombe entered again. Her face was flushed, her eyes were bright with anger, and all her self-command was working hard against some new shock. She sat down close beside me and told me at once what had happened.

A letter, written in a strange hand and brought secretly to the house, had been put into Laura's hands. It was an anonymous letter, and its purpose was plain. It warned her against her marriage with Sir Percival Glyde. Miss Halcombe said she had tried with all her strength to calm her sister, but Laura had been greatly frightened and distressed. Then she asked me a question which showed how entirely she trusted my judgment. Ought she to wait and consult Mr. Fairlie's lawyer the next day, or ought she to begin making inquiries at once?

I answered without hesitation. A day lost might be a day lost forever. If the writer of the letter was still in the neighbourhood, that chance must be taken immediately. Miss Halcombe agreed with me at once. She cared nothing for appearances where Laura's safety was concerned. Between us we quickly settled

what could be done. The first thing was to learn how the letter had reached the house, and whether any person in the village had seen the messenger.

By questioning the servant and then following the matter farther, we found that the letter had not come by post. It had been given by hand. A strange woman had left it. That discovery strengthened every suspicion already in my mind. It pointed, not to some far-off enemy, but to one living, watching, and moving close around Limmeridge itself. More than that, it seemed to point to Anne Catherick. Who else knew enough to fear Sir Percival? Who else had already warned me once in dark and broken ways?

I went out to make inquiries with all the speed I could. In a small place news does not sleep long, especially when it concerns a stranger. Little by little I got a trace. A woman answering to the rough description that had been given was said to have been seen near the churchyard. The mention of the churchyard struck me strongly at once. Mrs. Fairlie was buried there. If Anne Catherick had returned to Limmeridge secretly, there was no spot she was more likely to visit.

I made my way there without delay. On nearing the place, I did not go in openly at once. Some instinct told me to be cautious. From my position outside, I soon saw that I had not come in vain. First I noticed an elderly woman in a shawl, brown-faced, healthy, and simple in manner. She walked a little apart and spoke to someone whose figure was hidden from me by cloak and hood. The older woman said a few impatient but not unkind words, as if she were used to odd behaviour in her companion and yet had grown tired of it. Then she moved away.

Left alone, the cloaked figure went closer to a grave. I waited and watched. The woman took a white cloth, wet it in the little stream that ran by the churchyard wall, and then came back and knelt before the stone. I saw her kiss the white cross upon it. I saw her begin to clean the inscription with slow, careful hands, like a person performing some poor act of love and duty. Even before I saw her face clearly, my heart told me who she must be.

I entered the churchyard by the stile and came toward her as quietly as I could. She heard me at last, started up in fear, and stood looking at me in silent terror. I spoke as gently as possible and asked her not to be afraid. Then I came close

enough to see her face, and all doubt ended. It was the same face that had looked at me in the moonlight on the road near London. It was Anne Catherick.

Recognition did not bring her peace. She trembled, looked this way and that, and seemed always half ready to run. Still, she knew me. I spoke of our first meeting and of the kindness I had meant her then. I told her that no harm should come to her from me. Little by little her fear lessened. But even when she grew calmer, her manner remained strange, uncertain, and deeply troubled, as if every minute spent in that place put her in danger.

I asked why she had come again to Limmeridge, and why she had written to Miss Fairlie. At first she answered very little. She looked at Mrs. Fairlie's grave, then at me, and then back at the grave again, as though the dead woman was closer to her thoughts than any living soul. At last she said that she had come because she must warn Laura. She had once been afraid to speak fully when the chance was given to her, and now she had returned to make up for that failure. Miss Fairlie, she said, must not marry Sir Percival Glyde.

I pressed her as carefully as I could. What was the reason? What had Sir Percival done? What did she know against him? Here her words became broken and confusing, yet the feeling in them was too strong to be doubted. She said that Sir Percival was cruel, that he had shut her up, that he was afraid of something she knew, and that there was a secret which could frighten him. More than once she repeated that word—secret—with a fixed look and a hard anger unlike her earlier fear. It was plain that this one thought lived in her mind with unusual force.

I begged her to tell me the secret itself. If she would tell it to me, I said, Miss Fairlie might still be saved from a terrible mistake. But here she drew back from me. She seemed willing to warn, willing even to threaten in general words, yet not able to go farther. At one moment I thought she would speak. At the next, the chance was gone. Her eyes shifted suddenly toward the trees, and she whispered that we were not alone, that she was watched, and that she must leave me immediately.

Before I could stop her, she had broken away. I tried to follow, but she moved with that strange quickness I remembered from our first meeting. In another

minute she was gone. The older woman in the shawl returned too late to be of much use to me. From her I learned only that Anne had been living for a short time at a lonely place on the moor called Todd's Corner, and that she was harmless in one sense, though troubled in mind and difficult to guide. This was something, but it was not enough.

I went back to the house with just enough knowledge to increase fear and not enough to direct it. Anne had confirmed the warning of the anonymous letter. She had linked Sir Percival, her own past suffering, and some hidden secret together beyond doubt. But she had still not told what the secret was. When I reported all this to Miss Halcombe, she listened with that dark earnest look which came to her face whenever danger moved nearer. Both of us understood that the matter had passed beyond mere uneasiness. Something real was hidden beneath it now. Something dangerous. And Laura Fairlie stood in its path.

Part 6

After I told Miss Halcombe what had passed in the churchyard, we both felt that the danger was no longer a matter of dark guesses. Anne Catherick had not spoken clearly, but she had spoken strongly enough. She feared Sir Percival, she hated him, and she believed that she knew something which could hurt him if it came to light. Miss Halcombe listened in silence, and when I had finished she said that no marriage ought to be allowed to go forward while such warnings remained unanswered.

That same day we followed another small clue. At the farm where Anne and Mrs. Clements had stayed, we learned that Anne had suddenly fallen into agitation after hearing village talk in the farmhouse parlour. She and Mrs. Clements had then left Limmeridge in great haste the very next morning, refusing to explain themselves. On our return, Miss Halcombe questioned the dairymaid Hannah, who remembered more clearly what had been said that night. The talk, it seemed, had been about Sir Percival Glyde, his expected coming, and his marriage to Miss Fairlie. That was enough. Anne had heard the name and the purpose of his visit,

and the shock had driven her away at once.

There was now no honest way of putting the matter aside. Anne's fear was not general fear of all men or all strangers. It fixed itself again and again upon one man. Her warning letter, her appearance in the churchyard, her broken words to me, and this new proof from the farm all pointed in the same direction. When Miss Halcombe and I were alone again, I asked her whether any doubt remained in her mind. She answered me at once, with all her strength in her voice, that Sir Percival Glyde himself must remove that doubt, or Laura Fairlie should never be his wife.

While we were still speaking, a fly came up the drive. An elderly gentleman stepped out briskly, neat in dress, fresh in colour, and active in manner. This was Mr. Gilmore, the family lawyer, who had come to remain at Limmeridge during Sir Percival's visit and to settle the business of the marriage if that business went forward. I looked at him with more interest than I could show. He was to stay where I could not stay, to hear what I would not hear, and to stand close to Laura's future at the very moment when I was being forced away from it.

Mr. Gilmore and Miss Halcombe went in together, and I was left by myself in the garden. My departure for the next morning was already fixed. There was no longer any place for me in the affairs of that house, except as a danger to the woman I loved. So I wandered alone through the grounds and gave myself, for those last hours, to memory instead of hope. Every path, every tree, every view over the open land had become dear to me because Laura had moved among them.

The night passed heavily, and the last morning came too soon. It was early and cold when I went down, but I found both sisters already at the breakfast-table, waiting for me. We tried to eat, and we tried to speak of indifferent things, but the effort was vain from the first. The room was dim, the house was silent, and the sorrow between us was too strong to be hidden. At last I rose, because I could bear the false calm no longer. When I held out my hand, Laura turned away suddenly and left the room.

Miss Halcombe told me it was better so, for Laura's sake and for mine. I do not know how I answered her. I could only ask, with all my poor gratitude,

whether I had deserved that she should write to me and let me know the end of things. Her reply has never left me. She said that I had deserved everything she could do for me while we both lived, and that whatever the end might be, I should know it. Then, when I faltered and said that I might one day perhaps still be of use, even after the memory of my presumption had faded, she caught both my hands in hers and spoke with a noble frankness that raised her above every fear and every form.

She told me that if ever the time came, she would trust me as her friend and Laura's friend, as her brother and Laura's brother. Then she kissed my forehead as a sister might have done and called me by my Christian name. There was nothing weak in her kindness. It was one of those acts which bring courage with them. She said I should remain where I was and master myself while she went upstairs to watch me leave from the balcony. When she had gone, I turned to the window and stood looking out over the lonely autumn country, trying to gather strength enough to walk out of that house like a man.

I had been alone no more than a minute when I heard the door open softly again and the light movement of a dress behind me. I turned, and there was Laura. She came toward me pale and quiet, more resolved in that moment than I had ever seen her before. One hand moved slowly along the edge of the table as if she needed its support. In the other she held something hidden in the folds of her dress. When she reached me, she said she had gone into the drawing-room to fetch a little thing that might remind me of my visit to Limmeridge and of the friends I left behind.

It was a small drawing of the summer-house where we had first met. She had made it herself. As she held it out, the paper trembled in her hand, and it trembled in mine when I took it. I thanked her as steadily as I could, and told her it would remain with me always. Then I said what little I dared. If a time should ever come, I told her, when the devotion of my whole heart and strength could give her one moment of happiness or save her one moment of pain, would she try to remember the poor drawing-master who had once taught her? Miss Halcombe had promised to trust me. Would she promise too?

Laura's eyes filled with tears. She said she promised it with all her heart, and begged me not to look at her as I was looking then. I went a little nearer and asked, as a parting word only, whether I might say that her future happiness was dear to my hopes too. She gave me her hand, and I held it fast. For one moment I forgot everything except that living touch. Then the truth broke from her in the faintest, saddest words I ever heard from human lips. "For God's sake, leave me," she said. In those words she confessed all that she had never meant to confess.

I had no right to answer her, and I did not answer. The words themselves sent me away. I let her hand go, and the tears blinded me so that I could hardly see her for the last time. I saw only that she sank into a chair, that her arms fell upon the table, and that her fair head dropped down upon them in weariness and grief. Then I left the room, left the house, and left behind me the short dream of happiness that had changed my life. From that moment, Laura Fairlie belonged no longer to my present, but to my past.

Part 7

I now take up the story where Walter Hartright was forced to leave it. I had come to Limmeridge House to deal with the legal business of Miss Fairlie's marriage, and I reached the house on the very day before his departure. Even before I knew anything of the secret trouble there, I saw enough to make me uneasy. Miss Fairlie looked pale and worn, and there was a heaviness in the air of the house that no one openly explained.

I saw Mr. Hartright only briefly before he left, and I understood at once that something painful had happened during his stay. I did not know the truth then, but I could see that the house had changed him and that he had not left it lightly. When he was gone, Miss Fairlie's condition became more striking to me. She was always gentle, always thoughtful for others, but her quiet manner now seemed to rest on real suffering.

As family lawyer and old friend, I felt it my duty to speak to her about the marriage settlement before matters went farther. I asked her to consider, calmly

and practically, what she would wish done with her money if she married and later made a will. She listened with attention, but with visible pain. The subject itself seemed to press on her like a burden she had no strength to bear.

When I asked whether she had any wish of her own that should be protected, her first answer was not about money at all. She said, with sudden feeling, that Marian must not be taken from her, and begged that Marian should always live with her. That reply showed me more clearly than before how little real happiness she expected from the marriage before her. Her heart turned first not to future comfort, but to the one person she trusted most.

I explained that such an arrangement could be made privately, and asked again about the disposal of her fortune. Then she answered more directly. She said Marian had been both mother and sister to her, and asked whether she might leave the money to Marian. But when I pressed her a little and asked whether she meant all of it, she hesitated, coloured, and answered, "Not all of it." There was some other thought in her mind which she could not bring herself to confess to me.

I am not a romantic man, and I was not then in possession of the full truth. Still, I was old enough to read what was written in her face. The distress of the girl, the hesitation over that small remainder, and the nervous way her hand went back to a little album near her, all told their own story. I came away from that interview grieved and more than half ashamed that I should have been obliged to trouble her with legal questions at such a time.

My anxiety increased when the formal business began. Sir Percival did not deal with me openly and directly as I had hoped. He put the whole matter into the hands of his own solicitor, and I soon found that the terms demanded on his side were not the terms of a man satisfied with fair provision. The arrangement proposed would have given him a dangerous interest in his wife's fortune and far too much power over money that ought to have remained under her own protection.

I could not accept such terms in silence. So I went to Mr. Fairlie and argued the matter as strongly as I knew how. I told him plainly that Sir Percival had no right to expect more than the income, that the capital itself should remain under

Laura's control, and that no decent solicitor would willingly give a husband a benefit of twenty thousand pounds in his wife's death. It was a hard thing to say, but it was true, and it had to be said.

Mr. Fairlie met all this, as he met most serious things, with selfish weakness and foolish irritation. He laughed, complained, played with his smelling-bottle, and tried to turn the whole question into a joke. The more serious I became, the more softly useless he became in reply. At last I understood that reason, friendship, and even plain decency would not move him from his lazy surrender of responsibility.

That left me in a miserable position. If I refused to act, another lawyer would simply be found to do the same bad work. If I remained, I might at least soften what I could and keep watch over Laura's interests as far as circumstances allowed. So, with a heavy conscience, I did what many professional men are forced to do: I stayed in the business because leaving it would not save the person I wished to protect.

When I returned to London, the altered settlement had to be drawn. In effect, it set aside the very people Miss Fairlie most wished to remember, and it placed her fortune under terms that I disliked from first to last. I sent the papers in because the law required completion, not because my judgment approved them. If I speak strongly now, it is because I felt strongly then, and because time has not softened that feeling.

Thus ended my own share in the story at that stage. I had seen enough to know that Miss Fairlie was walking toward marriage without peace of mind, and that the legal preparations around her were as unsatisfactory as her heart was unhappy. I left Limmeridge with a settled opinion which I do not withdraw. No daughter of mine should have been married to any man alive under such a settlement as I was compelled to make for Laura Fairlie.

Part 8

After my interview with Mr. Fairlie, I returned to London with little hope and

less peace of mind. The settlement was completed in a form which I disliked, but I could not prevent it. Some weeks later, while walking in the street, I met Mr. Hartright again by chance. He was greatly changed. His face was thin and worn, his clothes were careless, and there was a restless, uncertain look in him which troubled me at once. He asked hurriedly whether the marriage was soon to happen, then checked himself as if he blamed himself for asking. When I told him only that time would show, he said he was going far away to seek work in another country and cared little where he went or how long he stayed.

Even then I could see that his heart had never left Limmeridge House. He brightened for one instant when I mentioned that the sisters were not at home, but away in Yorkshire. Then the same dark uneasiness crossed his face again. He pressed my hand and disappeared into the crowd without another word. I watched him go with real concern. I did not know the full story then, but I knew enough of young men to fear that deep disappointment, joined to solitude and a wandering life, might do him serious harm.

Soon after that meeting, I went down again to Limmeridge on business. The house felt empty and dull in the absence of the young ladies, and the whole place seemed to have lost its best life with them. When Miss Halcombe and Miss Fairlie returned, I saw at once that the question of the marriage had been settled. Sir Percival's explanation of Anne Catherick's warning had been accepted. I do not say that it satisfied me completely, but it had satisfied those whose judgment had to decide the matter, and I was no longer in a position to do more than carry the business through.

Miss Fairlie submitted. That is the truest word for it. She did not brighten, she did not regain her old ease, and she did not speak of the future with any warmth. But she no longer resisted. Her manner had the stillness of a woman who has given up hope of escape and is now trying only to do her duty without complaint. If any further resistance remained in her heart, it did not show itself openly to me. The final arrangements were made, and the wedding day was fixed.

When the marriage came near, I saw again how unlike Laura and Marian were, and yet how deeply they belonged to one another. Miss Halcombe kept her

courage and practical sense, but there was grief under both. Miss Fairlie was gentle, pale, and obedient, like a person moving through a ceremony already decided by others. I had seen many marriages arranged in my professional life, and some were wiser than this, some worse. But I cannot remember another in which the bride's quiet submission gave me so heavy a feeling beforehand.

At this point, my own share in the events of that time comes to an end. I can add nothing useful beyond the plain fact that Laura Fairlie became the wife of Sir Percival Glyde. The rest of what immediately followed is best told from Marian Halcombe's own notes, because she stood nearest to her sister then and saw what I could only partly guess. Her record begins just before the wedding and continues after Laura has left Limmeridge. In her hands, the story moves from law and arrangement back to the life of the heart.

Marian wrote that on the morning of the wedding, everything in the house seemed full of movement and confusion, and yet one thought stayed in her mind through it all. She could not drive away the strange hope that some hindrance might still arise and stop the marriage at the last moment. She knew this hope was foolish, and she blamed herself for it, but it remained. She asked herself whether the same secret desperate wish was still alive in Laura too, hidden under that quiet face.

She and Laura kissed each other and promised each other not to lose courage. Then Marian withdrew for a little while to her own room and tried to write, but her thoughts were too confused and too rapid. She saw the carriages waiting below, heard people moving through the house, and felt that everything was hurrying toward the one end she most feared. Each minute seemed to bring the church nearer. Each small sound made her start. Still, nothing happened to delay the day.

Before eleven o'clock, the thing was done. Laura Fairlie and Sir Percival Glyde were married. The words are simple, but the sorrow behind them was not simple at all. Marian noted the fact in her diary almost like someone recording a death. There was no room for long description because grief had already closed around her heart. What she had feared had happened. What she had secretly hoped against had not come to pass.

By the afternoon, Laura was gone from Limmeridge. Marian wrote only a few words then, because tears prevented more. The sisters had been divided after years of living almost as one life. The house which had held so much of their childhood and companionship now stood without its gentlest presence. The first stage of the story ended there, not with joy after a wedding, but with separation, silence, and the feeling that something precious had been given away to danger.

Yet Marian's record did not end in helpless sorrow. Even in pain, her mind was already turning forward. Laura had gone, but not beyond Marian's reach forever. They had promised each other courage, and Marian meant to keep that promise. When her sister should call for her, she would go. When her sister should need strength, she would bring it. So, even while the first part of the story closes in grief, the next begins in loyalty.

Six months later, Marian was writing again from Blackwater Park in Hampshire, where Laura and her husband were returning after the winter abroad. Marian had waited through those long months in loneliness and expectation, counting the days until she could be with Laura once more. Sir Percival was bringing his wife back from Italy and the Tyrol, and with them came Count Fosco and his wife, who were to stay for a time at Blackwater. Marian cared little who else came, so long as Laura herself returned. That hope carried her into the next phase of the story, and toward dangers greater than any she had yet imagined.

Part 9

Marian's journal began again in a very different place from Limmeridge. Blackwater Park, she wrote, seemed the exact opposite of the open northern country she loved. The house stood on flat land and was shut in by trees, as if the air itself could hardly move around it. One wing was said to be very old, there had once been a moat, and even the name of the place came from the dark water in the park. On her first evening there, after her delayed journey, she had seen almost nothing beyond a civil housekeeper, a servant, her own little rooms, and the gloomy feel of the place itself.

Yet none of that mattered much to her while Laura was still one day away. She sat with her tea beside her and tried to quiet herself, but quiet was impossible. The turret clock struck eleven with what she called a ghostly sound, a dog woke and howled somewhere beyond a corner, and the servants moved below with bolts and bars as the house closed for the night. Even then she could not go to sleep. The thought that by the next day she would hear Laura's voice again kept her in a fever of joy and expectation.

On the morning of June twelfth she was restless from the first hour. Time moved badly for her, because every small delay felt like an injury. She could bear the company of no one for long, and she could fix her mind on nothing. Sir Percival, Count Fosco, Madame Fosco, and every other person connected with the return seemed to mean nothing beside one fact only. Laura was coming back to her.

At last the travellers arrived. Marian saw Laura again after six months of separation, and in that first joy there was no room for anything else. She embraced her as if those lost months had all pressed into one moment. For a little while she would not let herself look closely, question closely, or compare past and present too carefully. She was content just to have Laura before her again, alive, loving, and within reach of her arms.

But after the first happiness had settled a little, Marian began to see change. Laura was not broken, and she was not openly miserable, but she was altered. There was a softer weakness in her, a quicker fear, and a habit of yielding before she had once formed a clear wish of her own. Travel and marriage had not made her stronger. They had made her more dependent, more ready to be guided, and less able to resist the pressure of others.

Sir Percival, on his side, was outwardly civil enough at first. He had the good sense to know that Marian's presence was important to Laura, and he behaved as if he accepted that fact. But there was nothing in his manner to win Marian's trust. She had distrusted him before, and time had not cured that feeling. If anything, the easier politeness of his behaviour now only made her more watchful, because she saw in it management rather than kindness.

Madame Fosco made a strange impression at once. Marian had known her before as Laura's aunt by marriage, but now she seemed to have given up herself almost completely to her husband. She was still handsome in a hard dark way, still silent, still self-controlled, but all her sharp life appeared to move only where he directed it. She watched him, answered him, and followed him with a devotion that had something slavish in it. Marian could not understand how such a woman had been bent so fully under another will.

Then the Count himself came fully into view, and the whole air of the house changed. He was large, splendid in his dress and manner, easy, smiling, and full of confidence. There was humour in him, courtesy in him, even something playful on the surface. But Marian felt almost immediately that all this brightness covered power. He did not push himself forward in a noisy way. He entered a room as if he belonged to it at once, and before long every person in it seemed, knowingly or not, to be moving around his presence.

What made him more remarkable was the odd softness he showed toward small living creatures. His birds, his pets, and later even his white mice were treated by him with patience and fondness that might almost have seemed charming in another man. He could whistle to canaries, feed them from his finger, and talk to them in a tone half comic and half tender. These little scenes amused the others and helped his place in the house. But Marian, who missed little, did not forget that a man may be gentle to animals and cruel to human beings at the same time.

During those first days at Blackwater, Marian tried to enjoy the simple fact that she and Laura were together again. They walked, talked, and sat together whenever they could. Yet beneath that comfort another feeling slowly grew. Laura was glad to have her sister with her, very glad, but she was not at peace. Some burden had come into her married life, and though she did not yet speak it clearly, Marian began to feel it in pauses, in sudden looks, and in the guarded way Laura spoke of her husband and of the Count.

So the second epoch of the story opened, not with loud disaster, but with a darkening atmosphere. The sisters were together again, and that gave Marian

courage. But Blackwater was no safe home, and the people who now filled it were not ordinary guests in an ordinary country house. Before many more days had passed, Marian would know that Count Fosco was not merely the most noticeable man she had ever seen. He was the most dangerous.

Part 10

In the first days after Laura's return, Marian began to see more clearly what kind of life marriage had given her sister. The outward form was still polite, and there had been no open violence yet. But there was strain under everything. Sir Percival was uneasy about money, uneasy about control, and uneasy in ways he did not explain. Laura, who had once hidden her suffering as much for Marian's sake as for her own, could not keep it back much longer.

One evening the two sisters went out alone. The air was heavy, the flowers hung down in the garden, and the whole evening seemed to carry a sense of blight. Laura chose the way toward the lake because the sand, the heath, and the fir-trees reminded her a little of Limmeridge. They sat together in the boat-house, with white fog over the water and no sound anywhere around them. It was there, in that lonely place, that Laura at last began to tell the truth about her married life.

She did not complain in a violent way. That was not her nature. She spoke quietly, and for that very reason her words hurt more. She said that the man to whom she had given her whole life cared least for the gift. Then she said something even sadder. Marian was never to laugh at her own poverty again, because poverty had left Marian free, while Laura's wealth had brought her into a kind of bondage.

Those words struck Marian with full force. Until then she had known that Laura was unhappy, but not the full moral weight of that unhappiness. In one moment she understood that marriage, money, and obedience had all become one chain around her sister. Worse still, she felt the bitter sting of her own share in the past. It had been Marian herself who had helped send Walter away and who had done so in the belief that she was protecting Laura's duty.

Before the evening ended, another strange thing happened. As the light grew weaker and the mist thickened over the lake, both sisters saw a distant figure moving slowly across the open ground beyond the boat-house. It stopped, waited, and passed on again with the white mist behind it. In that dimness neither of them could be sure whether it was a man or a woman. But the sight shook them both, and when they returned through the plantation, Laura was nervous and afraid.

The next morning or soon after, the hidden pressure in the house came more openly into view. Sir Percival wanted Laura to sign a deed. Marian understood at once that the matter concerned money that he urgently needed, and she also understood that Laura had doubts, though Laura's married submission still held her back from open refusal. The discussion became heated. Sir Percival lost command of himself, and the ugly side of his nature showed plainly in Marian's presence.

At that moment Count Fosco stepped in. He did not oppose his friend with anger. He did something much more effective. In his soft, easy, superior way, he argued Sir Percival down and persuaded him to delay the business of the signature until the next day. Sir Percival yielded, not because he had grown calmer in heart, but because some other secret urgency was pulling him away from the house and because the Count's influence over him was stronger than ordinary friendship could explain.

This scene left Laura and Marian in a humiliating position. The one person who had softened Sir Percival's conduct was the very man Marian mistrusted most. The Count's interference kept her at Blackwater, because without his support she could not safely remain near Laura after Sir Percival's behaviour. Yet to depend on Count Fosco for anything was itself a cause of dread. Marian felt, with full bitterness, that the influence she feared most was the one influence now holding her beside her sister in the hour of need.

There was something else that made the delay more suspicious. Sir Percival drove away immediately afterward on a journey he had not explained. Count Fosco went with him for a long walk or at least was later absent in connection with him, and Marian found this deeply unnatural. Sir Percival cared for riding,

not walking. The Count cared for comfort, not exercise. When men alter settled habits in a troubled household, the reason is often hidden and important. Marian began to feel that events were moving beneath the surface faster than she yet understood.

When the sisters were alone again, Laura returned to the question of the deed and asked why there had been no summons to the library. Marian told her that the business had been put off and that Count Fosco himself had said so. Laura was amazed. If Sir Percival needed money urgently, how could the matter wait? That question only deepened their suspicions. It suggested that some second purpose, more secret than money alone, was mixed up in the pressure put on Laura.

The answer began to come from the side of Anne Catherick. Laura had gone back alone toward the boat-house and had not found Anne there. Instead she discovered marks in the sand and then a word written in large letters: "LOOK." Scraping the sand away, she found a strip of paper hidden beneath it, signed with Anne's initials. But Sir Percival got possession of the message before Marian could see it. Even so, Laura remembered enough to make one thing plain. Anne had tried again to warn her.

From that point forward Laura's distrust became more exact. She no longer feared only Sir Percival in a general way. She now believed that there had been a third watcher near the plantation and that this watcher was Count Fosco, acting as Sir Percival's spy and informer. Marian did not yet know the whole truth, but the pattern was beginning to show itself. Laura was being watched, pressed to sign, and cut off from independent action. Around her stood two men, not one, and each seemed to know more than he said.

Part 11

That same evening, after the scene in the library, Count Fosco seemed determined to wipe it from our minds by force of talk. At dinner he was in perfect spirits. He moved from one subject to another with such ease that Laura and I, against our own better judgment, found ourselves listening with real attention. He

told stories of travel, spoke of strange people he had met, compared one country with another, and made even his own foolish younger days sound amusing. Before long, he had done what very few men can do. He had made himself agreeable to two women who feared him.

After dinner he left us, modestly and smoothly, to go back to the library and read. Laura suggested a walk before night closed in. Madame Fosco excused herself at once and said that her husband might soon want fresh cigarettes, which no one but she could make properly. Even in that little answer there was something humiliating in her pride. She did not merely obey him. She seemed to value herself by the perfection of her obedience.

Laura and I walked again toward the lake through the thick summer evening. The weather was close, the flowers were drooping, and everything in the air seemed to wait for coming rain. We went through the plantation and sat once more in the boat-house, with the white mist hanging low over the water. The place was quiet, but it was not peaceful. It seemed made for uneasy thoughts.

While we sat there, the conversation turned strangely. Count Fosco's name came up, and with it his way of speaking about crime and discovery. He had amused us earlier, but he had also shown something more dangerous than amusement. He had spoken as if great crimes might be hidden by clever men and never found out at all. There was intelligence in what he said, but there was also a dark pleasure in saying it, and that pleasure alarmed me.

Sir Percival had heard some of those remarks and had openly admired them. That too was not forgotten between Laura and me. I asked, as calmly as I could, why two men should speak with such ease of hidden crime unless the subject held more than passing interest for them. Laura did not answer at once, but I could feel her growing more and more nervous. At last she spoke the thought that had been forming in both our minds. She said Count Fosco was Sir Percival's spy.

That word did not come from clear proof yet, but it came from instinct sharpened by fear. Laura believed that he watched her, listened for her, and served Sir Percival in ways that did not show themselves openly. Later, we had reason enough to remember that judgment. Even then it seemed to fit too many things:

his sudden presence at the right moments, his quiet power over Sir Percival, and his strange knowledge of matters which should have remained private. The word “spy” once spoken between us could not be unsaid.

When we rose to go back through the plantation, Laura suddenly stopped and listened. At first I tried to comfort her by saying that she heard only leaves or some slight noise in the trees. But she was right to be afraid. I heard it too after a moment. It was like the sound of a light footstep following us in the dark.

We went on quickly, and before we were halfway through the plantation she stopped me again. This time both of us heard not only the steps but a long heavy sigh somewhere behind us in the blackness. I called out twice and got no answer. Then the footsteps moved away and slowly sank into silence. We reached the open lawn at last and hurried back to the house, with Laura pale and trembling beside me.

At the hall door she asked me who it could have been. I told her to say nothing of it to anyone, because silence was safer for us than careless speech. Then I sent her upstairs and went straight to the library under cover of looking for a book. If Count Fosco or his wife had only just come in from outside, I meant to know it. What I found was quite different. There sat the Count at his ease in a great chair, smoking and reading, with Madame Fosco by him making cigarettes like a quiet servant-child. Neither of them could possibly have been the person following us in the trees.

That discovery solved one question but left many others untouched. If the Count had not been behind us in the plantation, someone else had been there, and someone else had watched us. Yet the Count remained in my thoughts more strongly than ever. The more I saw of him, the more extraordinary he seemed. He could be heavy in body and yet swift in influence. He could be playful one moment, commanding the next, and never appear to have changed.

I began then to observe him more closely as a study in himself. He loved little creatures with real patience and skill, especially his birds and his white mice, and he handled them with a tenderness that would have made many people trust him at once. He also asked questions about Italians in the nearest town, received letters

with foreign stamps, and once had a letter marked with a large official-looking seal. These things, taken separately, proved nothing. Taken together, they added to the air of mystery around him.

So, while Laura's danger from Sir Percival remained before me, another conviction was steadily forming behind it. Count Fosco was not merely a clever guest in the house and not merely a friend who sometimes softened Sir Percival's temper. He was a man with hidden connections, hidden purposes, and an unusual power of command. From that point onward, I no longer feared only what Sir Percival might do in anger. I feared what Count Fosco might help him do in cold blood.

Part 12

The next morning brought Marian no peace. In the night she had blamed herself again and again for her part in Laura's marriage, and by morning that pain had turned into a firm resolve. She would bear insult, suspicion, and every discomfort at Blackwater if staying there could help Laura. There was another smaller event that morning, but it mattered because it gave Laura an excuse to be away from the house. She had lost the little brooch Marian had given her before the wedding, and she went out herself to search for it near the boat-house and the plantation.

Marian meanwhile waited for the answer from the London lawyer. She no longer trusted anyone in the house and feared even open movement within it. Count Fosco seemed harmless enough on the surface, amusing himself with his birds in the breakfast-room, but Marian had already learned not to trust harmless surfaces. Instead of waiting indoors, she slipped out toward the lodge gate, hoping to receive the reply before any watching eyes could see it.

Her caution was justified. The messenger arrived by fly and handed her a letter from Mr. Kyrle, Mr. Gilmore's partner. His reply confirmed exactly what Marian and Laura had feared. He believed that Sir Percival wanted Laura's signature to support an improper loan out of her own fortune, and that such a deed might even

injure the rights of her future children. He advised that Laura should refuse to sign until the document had first been shown to him. That gave the sisters, at last, a clear and honest reason for resistance.

But the moment Marian finished reading, Count Fosco appeared before her in the lane as suddenly as if he had risen from the ground itself. He behaved with perfect politeness. He offered his arm, talked lightly, and pretended that he had come only by chance after hearing from his wife that Marian had gone out alone. Yet the smoothness of his manner only increased her dread. He never referred directly to the letter, and that silence was worse than open curiosity. Marian felt at once that he had discovered enough and meant to make use of it.

When they reached the house, Sir Percival had just returned and was in a savage temper. He cared nothing for Laura's lost brooch and wanted only his lunch and the business of the signature. But Count Fosco quietly drew him away to speak in private on the grass. Marian knew that conversation must concern Laura and the deed. She could do nothing except wait, and the helplessness of that waiting almost broke her strength. For all her courage, she was still only a woman shut inside a house where two men were deciding her sister's fate.

A little later the Count came to her alone and announced, with perfect grace, that Sir Percival had changed his mind and that the signing was put off for the present. Marian understood at once what had happened. The Count had seen enough to know that outside legal advice had been sought, and he had used that knowledge to stop the matter before open resistance could expose more than he wished exposed. The delay was a relief, but not a comfort. It meant only that some new calculation was now at work beneath the old pressure.

Exhausted by anxiety, Marian could no longer keep on her feet. She lay down in the drawing-room and slipped into a strange state between sleep and waking. In that vision she saw Walter Hartright far away among danger, death, and desolation, moving through scenes of fever, attack, shipwreck, and grave-like darkness. Each time she feared he would fall, he seemed to answer that the danger which destroyed others would spare him, and that he still walked on a dark road toward some appointed end. The dream was not clear in reason, but it was heavy

with fate.

When she woke, Laura was kneeling beside her in great agitation. Her face was flushed, her eyes were wild, and she could hardly speak for haste and fear. Then she whispered the words that changed the whole shape of the day. The figure near the lake, the footsteps in the plantation, the fear that had haunted them the night before, were no longer only guesses. Laura had seen the person at last. She had seen Anne Catherick, and she had spoken to her.

Marian was so shaken that for a moment she could hardly take in what she heard. But Laura was too full of what had happened to notice anything except her own need to speak. She drew Marian quickly away to her room, locked the door, and shut the inner curtains so that no one might surprise them. In that moment Marian felt, more strongly than ever before, that the scattered dangers around them had suddenly closed together. Anne Catherick was no longer a shadow on the edge of the story. She was in the very middle of it now.

Then Laura showed the first plain sign that the meeting had really taken place. The lost brooch was back on her dress. She had not found it herself. Anne had found it for her on the floor of the boat-house. That small object steadied Marian's thoughts because it was solid and undeniable. Whatever had happened between Laura and Anne, it had happened in the real world, in daylight, and within reach of Blackwater Park itself.

Marian at once warned her to speak low, because even an open window in that house might be dangerous. Laura answered that she had been searching carefully along the path through the plantation and then on the floor of the boat-house when a soft strange voice behind her spoke the old name, "Miss Fairlie." That name shook Laura deeply, because it belonged to the life before marriage, before fear, and before Sir Percival had become master over her movements. Anne had not greeted Lady Glyde. She had called back the girl Laura once had been.

Marian prepared herself to hear the whole account word for word. But before Laura could fully unfold it, one truth was already clear. Anne Catherick had returned not as a memory, not as a warning letter, and not as a distant shape half seen through fog. She had returned in person, close to the house, close to Laura,

and close to the secret that still hung over Sir Percival's life. The danger was now nearer than ever, and the next words Laura spoke might change everything.

Part 13

Laura told Marian the whole story in a low voice, with the door locked and the curtains drawn. She said that she had gone again to the boat-house to look for the lost brooch and had been searching the floor with her back to the entrance. Then a soft strange voice behind her had spoken her old name, "Miss Fairlie." That name alone had shaken her deeply, because it belonged to the life before marriage, before fear, and before Sir Percival had power over her days.

When she turned, she saw a woman she did not at first remember, dressed in a neat white gown, but with a poor worn shawl and bonnet over it. The woman noticed Laura looking at those poor things and said quickly that she did not care what she wore, so long as she might still wear white. Then she held out the lost brooch, which she had found on the floor. She asked Laura, with eager feeling, to let her pin it on the dress herself. That odd request, and the mention of Laura's mother, made Laura ashamed of her first distrust, and she let the poor creature do as she wished.

Then the woman reminded her of an old day at Limmeridge, when Mrs. Fairlie had walked with two little girls, one on each side. One had been Laura. The other had been Anne Catherick. Laura said that, while Anne stood close to her in the doorway, she suddenly saw the likeness between them with terrible force. Anne's face was thinner, paler, and more worn, but the resemblance was real enough to shock Laura almost as if she had seen her own face after long illness.

For a little while Anne spoke gently, though always in that quick broken way that belonged to her. But when Laura said she had thought perhaps Anne did not know she was married, everything changed. Anne answered violently that she loved the name Fairlie and hated the name Glyde. Then she said the true reason why she had come. She was there, she said, to make atonement before she died, and to undo some of the harm she had once caused.

After that she would not come inside the boat-house and sit quietly. She stayed at the entrance, with one hand on each side of it, always watching and listening, sometimes bending in to speak and sometimes drawing back to look around. She said she had been near the lake the night before and had heard Laura and Marian talking. She had heard enough to understand that Laura was helpless with her husband and that she herself had failed in the past to stop the marriage when warning might still have saved her.

Laura tried to calm her and asked what fear had held her back. Anne answered with the simplest and most terrible question. Should she not be afraid, she said, of a man who had shut her in a mad-house and who would shut her up again if he could? But then she added at once that she was not afraid now. When Laura asked why, Anne bent toward her and told her to look well at her face. She said she was dying, and that death had taken fear away from her at last.

From there her words grew stranger and sadder. She spoke of Mrs. Fairlie, of heaven, of the grave at Limmeridge, and of her longing to lie near the one person who had been kind to her. But mixed in with those wild sad thoughts was something very important. She said that Sir Percival had a secret, that her mother knew it, and that she herself had once used it to frighten him. If Laura knew that secret too, Anne said, Sir Percival would be afraid of her and would not dare to treat her as cruelly as he had treated Anne.

Laura begged her to go on, and for one moment it seemed that the truth would come at last. Anne began to say that her mother had told her something years before, and that on the next day Sir Percival had acted against her. But just there she stopped. She listened suddenly, moved away from the entrance, and then came back in great alarm. She whispered that they were not alone, that someone was watching, and that the secret could not be spoken then.

Before Laura could hold her, Anne had already decided what must happen next. She said that Laura must come again to the boat-house at the same hour on the following day, and must come alone. Then she pushed Laura back inside and disappeared into the thicker wood on the left, where the ground sank away. Laura was too frightened to call after her, and by the time she could move she saw no

one and heard no one in the plantation. So she had run straight back to tell Marian everything.

Marian listened with growing certainty that Anne's words were not empty fancy. She admitted that Anne's manner was broken and strange, but she trusted the evidence of Sir Percival's conduct more than she trusted Anne's confusion. A man does not press his wife, watch her, frighten one woman into silence, and then change his plans suddenly for no reason at all. So Marian told Laura firmly that the second meeting must take place. Laura should keep the appointment, and Marian herself would follow at a safe distance and remain near enough to hear if anything went wrong.

Left alone afterward, Marian felt two fears at once. One was the fear that Anne's secret might at last be within reach. The other was the fear that Count Fosco and Sir Percival were already moving to stop it. When she asked after them later, she learned that the two men had gone out together for a long walk, though neither of them was a man who cared for such exercise. That small fact fixed itself in her mind. Before the next day came, she already felt that all the danger around Laura was drawing closer and taking shape.

Part 14

After hearing Laura's account of the first meeting with Anne, I left her for a little while and went out to search the grounds. My mind was too full to stay still. I wanted to know where Count Fosco and Sir Percival were, and whether their sudden absence had any connection with Anne's fear. I walked through the paths near the house, looked from one side of the garden to the other, and found nothing. The very emptiness of the place made me more uneasy.

When I came back indoors, I searched again from room to room on the lower floor, but still saw no sign of the two men. Then I went upstairs toward Laura's room. On the way, Madame Fosco opened her door and told me, with her usual cold politeness, that her husband and Sir Percival had gone out together for a long walk. That answer fixed itself in my mind. Neither of them was a man who loved

walking for its own sake, and yet they had gone out together at the very time when Anne's warning had become more dangerous than ever.

When I rejoined Laura, she at once asked what had become of the matter of the signature. I told her that, for the present at least, the business was put off, and that Count Fosco himself had told me so. She was astonished. If Sir Percival needed money urgently, how could he wait? That question brought us straight back to Anne. Whatever secret she held, it was strong enough to make two men change their plans.

Then Laura told me the rest of what had happened that afternoon. She had gone back to the boat-house alone at the appointed hour and had found no one there. She waited for a little while, restless and disappointed, and then as she came out she saw marks in the sand close under the front of the place. Stooping down, she found the word "LOOK" written there in large letters. When she scraped the sand away, she discovered a narrow strip of paper hidden beneath it.

The paper was signed with Anne's initials, and Laura had read it only for a short time before it was taken from her. Even so, she remembered its meaning clearly enough. Anne wrote that she could not trust herself to come again to the boat-house, because she was watched and in danger. If Laura wished to know the secret about Sir Percival, she must seek Anne's mother, Mrs. Catherick, at a place named Old Welmingham in Hampshire. There, and there only, the truth might be learned.

Before Laura could hide or keep the paper, Sir Percival appeared and demanded to know what she held in her hand. Count Fosco was with him, and Laura now believed with complete certainty that he had watched the meeting place, guided Sir Percival there, and ruined the chance of a second private interview. When she spoke of him, she no longer hesitated. She called him Sir Percival's spy and informer, and said Anne had judged him rightly from the first. I could not answer her with comfort, because in my own heart I feared she was right.

While we were still speaking, there came a soft knock at the bedroom door. I opened it and found Madame Fosco outside, holding my handkerchief and

pretending she had brought it up as she passed. But one look at her face told me the truth. She was pale to the lips, her hands shook violently, and her eyes looked past me into the room toward Laura. She had been listening before she knocked. The moment she turned away in silence, I felt that danger had come a step nearer to both of us.

That evening I made up my mind to act. If the men in that house were planning anything against Laura, I must know it. There was no use in waiting for chance any longer. I knew that Sir Percival and Count Fosco often sat late together on the terrace side of the house, and I determined that night to place myself where I could hear them if they spoke freely. It was a bold thing for a woman to do alone, but boldness had become necessary.

When the house was quiet, I left my room and found my way onto the flat part of the roof outside the window, from which I could creep along toward a place over the verandah. The night was dark and hot at first, but clouds were gathering and the air felt heavy with coming rain. From where I lay hidden, I could hear voices below when the men came out. Soon Sir Percival and the Count began to talk, and the whole truth of my danger in listening became clear at once. If I moved, I might be seen. If I withdrew too soon, I might lose the only knowledge that could help Laura.

So I stayed where I was and listened. Bit by bit their words showed me enough to confirm my worst fears. Sir Percival was in desperate money trouble. Count Fosco knew it well and spoke of it coolly, as a man speaks of figures in a book. More terrible still, they spoke of Anne Catherick and of Laura as obstacles to be mastered. I did not hear every word clearly enough to grasp the whole plan, but I heard enough to know that Laura's safety was in the hands of two men who could think calmly about ruining her life.

Then the rain began. At first it was light, and I hoped the conversation would soon end. But it grew heavier, colder, and more violent, while I still clung to my place and forced myself to remain. The water soaked through my clothes, ran over the roof, and chilled me through and through. Yet I would not leave while there was anything left to hear. By the time the voices ceased and I could safely creep

back to my room, I was trembling, faint, and half frozen. Before morning came, fever had laid hold of me. I had won knowledge, but the price of it was my own health, and perhaps much more than my health.

Part 15

The next morning I paid at once for the rain, the cold, and the strain of that terrible night. Fever seized me before the day was far advanced, and from that hour I was no longer mistress of myself. I knew enough at moments to understand that I had placed my own body between Laura and danger, and that my body had failed me at the worst possible time. That knowledge was harder to bear than the illness itself. While I lay weak and burning, the men I feared were still free to act.

My thoughts would not move in a straight line any longer. They came and went like broken lights in a storm. Sometimes I remembered the words spoken under the verandah with dreadful clearness. Sometimes I remembered only the sound of the rain, the beating of the clock, and the cold creeping deeper and deeper into me. I knew that Laura was somewhere near me in the house, and yet she seemed already far away, as if danger had begun to carry her off while I could do nothing.

Even in that confused state, one conviction held fast in me. Sir Percival and Count Fosco were not merely planning to force a signature now. They were looking beyond that failure, and they were looking at Laura herself as if her life, her money, and her freedom were parts of one dark calculation. I had heard too much to doubt it any longer. But hearing the truth and stopping it were now two different things. The truth was in my mind, and the power to use it had been struck out of my hands.

I still tried to write. The habit of keeping the diary remained with me even when my strength did not. But the lines grew broken, the words wandered, and the page itself began to show my defeat. I could no longer shape events clearly. I could only set down pieces of feeling and pieces of fear, as if I were calling out from inside a dream. The writing ceased to be a record and became little more than a struggle against darkness.

In those last fragments, the rain of the night before came back again and again. I wrote of the cold, of the clock striking, of numbers I could not count rightly, and of the blow that seemed to fall on my head with every sound. Then even those poor fragments failed. The final marks on the page looked less like words than like a desperate effort to hold one last thought. The hand that had so steadily guarded Laura could do no more than break down over her name.

After that point the diary itself was no longer truly mine. The page that follows bears another hand, large, bold, and perfectly controlled. Count Fosco had got hold of my book and had read it through while I lay ill. He did not hide his triumph. On the contrary, he chose to leave behind him a strange postscript, half admiration and half insult, in which he praised my courage, my memory, my judgment, and even the way I had described him. He wrote like a man who could enjoy his enemy, provided he still held the advantage.

What makes that postscript so hateful is not only its vanity, but its calmness. He praised the very stratagem by which I had overheard him, praised the exactness of my report, and then said that what he had learned from the diary would not change his plans because those plans had already been formed. He even claimed that he had offered medical help in my illness, as if his concern for my recovery could erase anything else. He closed by sending the book back through his wife, and by expressing his certainty that every effort made for Laura's good would fail. It was the politest threat I have ever known.

So my own narrative ended, not with success, but with fever, helplessness, and a mockery written by the cleverest villain in the house. Yet even that bitter interruption has its value. It shows exactly what sort of man Count Fosco was. He could admire greatness in another, even while he worked to ruin the person who possessed it. He could praise courage and still strike at innocence. In him, intelligence had become something colder and worse than brutality.

After this break, another witness takes up the story, and no witness could be more unlike me. Frederick Fairlie begins, as he always does, by complaining. He says that nobody ever lets him alone, that he is too ill and too nervous to write anything, and that he has been forced into giving an account against his will. Even

in the middle of serious events concerning his niece, he remains chiefly occupied with his own comfort, his own health, and the burden of being troubled at all. Still, unwilling though he is, he has to tell what came to him next.

He remembers little clearly, but he remembers enough to begin. One morning, toward the end of June or the beginning of July, he was resting among his beloved art objects when his servant Louis came in to announce a visitor. The visitor was a young woman named Fanny, Lady Glyde's maid. Fairlie was annoyed at once. He asked why the girl had come, and when he learned that she carried a letter from Marian Halcombe and would give it into no hand but his own, he yielded with the weak impatience that always passed in him for decision.

So Fanny was shown in. Fairlie noticed at once that she was frightened and near tears, though he describes even that with selfish irritation rather than pity. He asks after her shoes, complains of servants, and grumbles at every detail while the girl struggles to speak. Yet beneath all his absurdity something serious is pressing forward. Marian has sent him a letter, Laura's maid has been dismissed, and the household at Blackwater is already breaking apart. In his helpless, unwilling fashion, Frederick Fairlie now stands at the door of the next disaster.

Part 16

Frederick Fairlie's account continued in the only way he could continue anything: with complaint, delay, and self-pity. Yet, hidden inside his silly manner, there was something important. Fanny had told him that Marian had given her two letters, one for Fairlie and one for a gentleman in London, and that before she could receive Marian's extra spoken messages, Madame Fosco had appeared at the inn, made tea for her with unnatural kindness, and then left her fainting and confused. When Fanny recovered, the letters were still on her, but the chance to hear Marian's further instructions was gone. Even Fairlie, foolish as he was, understood enough to see that something disturbing had happened between Marian's farewell and Fanny's arrival at Limmeridge.

When he finally opened Marian's letter, his selfish comfort was sharply

disturbed. Marian had written to ask that Laura should be received at Limmeridge if the quarrels at Blackwater grew worse. Fairlie was offended, not because Laura suffered, but because married people, as he saw it, always threw their troubles upon single relatives. Before he had time to settle into that grievance, Count Fosco arrived in person. The Count at first charmed him with polished manners, soft talk, and flattering attention to his nerves, his room, and even the light at the window. Then he used that easy entrance to press his true object.

Fosco told him that the disagreements between Sir Percival and Laura were serious, that Marian had exaggerated nothing, and that only a temporary separation could prevent public scandal. He also argued that Laura could not travel alone all the way to Cumberland, and must break the journey in London at the house in St. John's Wood that Fosco had taken for himself and his wife. Fairlie tried weakly to escape the conversation, but the Count simply rode over every objection. In the end, to get rid of him and believing Laura would never leave Marian while she lay ill, Fairlie wrote the short careless note inviting her north and telling her to sleep in London on the way. That little letter, written for the sake of comfort and silence, became a tool in other hands.

Eliza Michelson then took up the story, and with her the whole tone changed. She began plainly, as a respectable widow trying to tell only what she had seen. On the morning Marian was first missed at breakfast, the upper housemaid found her wandering in fever and unable to understand herself. Laura ran first to her sister, but was so frightened and distressed that she could hardly help. Count Fosco and Madame Fosco, on the other hand, were calm and active at once, and Sir Percival sent for the local doctor, Mr. Dawson.

Mr. Dawson judged the case serious from the first. Fosco at once tried to advise him and was sharply rebuffed, but he bore the insult with smiling patience and withdrew. Even then he kept near the sick-room and near the management of everything around it. Laura stayed up unwisely through the nights, refusing to leave Marian, though she was too nervous and delicate to be of real use in nursing. Michelson, who admired nobility and form, thought the Count considerate and useful, but under her praise there was already the outline of something else: a man

always present when power was to be exercised, and absent only when absence itself might serve him better.

Soon Madame Fosco went to London and returned with a foreign nurse, Mrs. Rubelle. Mr. Dawson disliked the whole arrangement immediately. He called Fosco a quack, warned Michelson to watch the nurse carefully, and feared that Count Fosco wanted to try strange remedies of his own through her hands. But Mrs. Rubelle answered every question calmly, showed no sign of confusion, and took her place by Marian's bed with quiet skill. Michelson and Laura both watched her closely for days and found no open fault in her conduct. That only made the situation more dangerous, because a person who gives no cause for suspicion is often the hardest person to resist.

The crisis passed at last in Marian's favour. A London physician was called, and hope returned. Then, as soon as direct medical danger lessened, the structure of the house itself began to change. A quarrel, carefully managed, drove Dawson away. Sir Percival announced that the establishment at Blackwater must be broken up at once to save expense. All the indoor servants, except the dull under-housemaid Margaret Porcher, were dismissed in a body. The horses went, the grooms went, and the house fell suddenly into a strange lonely silence.

Michelson was shocked by this violence, but she was not allowed to resist it. When she had scarcely adjusted herself to the emptiness of the house, another plan was laid before her. Sir Percival and Count Fosco said that when Marian and Laura were strong enough to move, both ladies would benefit from a short stay first at the sea before going north to Cumberland. On that ground Michelson was asked, and in truth compelled, to go herself to Torquay and choose lodgings. She felt at once that the errand was nearly hopeless and that she was being sent away at the very moment when her presence was most needed, but in her dependent position she could do nothing except obey.

Before leaving, she made sure that Marian was certainly recovering. Marian sent kind messages to Laura and urged her not to tire herself too soon. Laura herself was still weak, shut much in her room, and more depressed than ever. Madame Fosco was with her when Michelson knocked, and Sir Percival and the

Count were walking together toward the lodge as the chaise carried Michelson away. Behind her she left a house almost empty of witnesses, with Marian still in the nurse's hands, Laura still frightened and low in spirit, and only one stupid servant left in the offices below. Michelson herself later admitted that the whole arrangement now looked more than unusual. It looked almost suspicious.

Her journey proved useless, exactly as she had feared. No such lodgings as had been described could be found at the price she was allowed to offer. So she returned to Blackwater and found yet another change. Count Fosco and his wife had left the house for their new home in St. John's Wood. Sir Percival told her so carelessly, almost as if he were glad to speak of anything except what truly mattered. When she asked who now attended Laura, he answered that Margaret Porcher was enough, and that a village woman had been brought in only for rough work below stairs.

That answer shocked her deeply, and it should shock the reader too. Blackwater Park was now almost stripped bare. Marian, though recovering, was not yet free; Laura was weak, isolated, and under Sir Percival's control; the doctor was gone; Michelson had been sent away and brought back to find the Count and Countess removed to the very London house through which Laura was later to pass. Everything was being simplified, cleared, and rearranged as if for some act that needed fewer eyes and fewer voices in the way. By the time Michelson stepped again into that house, the trap had nearly closed.

Part 17

When Mrs. Michelson came back to Blackwater, she found the house more empty and more unnatural than before. Count Fosco and his wife were gone to their house in St. John's Wood. Sir Percival remained, but the old order of the place had been broken. Laura was weak, Marian was still recovering, and almost every independent witness had been removed.

After that point, the story is no longer carried by one steady observer. It breaks into short statements, each narrow in itself, but terrible when joined to the others.

A new servant, Hester Pinhorn, later declared that she had taken a place as cook at Number Five, Forest Road, St. John's Wood, in the service of Count Fosco and his wife. She and one young housemaid were the only regular servants there when "company from the country" was expected.

The lady brought to that house was received as Lady Glyde. But the moment she entered, she was seized with sudden terror. Hester heard the bell ring wildly, ran upstairs, and saw the lady lying white and rigid, while her mistress said she had been taken by fright and Count Fosco called it a fit. From that hour the woman in the room became a patient under the charge of others, frightened, weakened, and cut off from every protection she should have had.

Hester's later testimony was carefully limited, and that very limitation makes it more chilling. She said that neither she nor the other servant ever saw the Count give Lady Glyde medicine with his own hand. She said he was never, to her knowledge, left alone in the room with her. She also said that the cause of the fright on first entering the house was never explained to her at all.

Then came the doctor's certificate, short, formal, and deadly in its calm. A medical man named Alfred Goodricke certified that he had attended Lady Glyde, aged twenty-one, that he last saw her on Thursday the twenty-fifth of July, 1850, at Number Five, Forest Road, St. John's Wood, and that she died there the same day. The cause given was aneurism, and the duration of the disease was not known. A few lines on paper did the work that violence alone could not safely do.

Another witness, Jane Gould, declared that she prepared the dead body for burial, saw it placed in the coffin, and saw the coffin screwed down before it was removed. Her words were meant to close every doubt. The body was there, the coffin was shut, the payment was made, and the legal appearance of death was complete. Once that point had been reached, identity itself could be buried under ceremony.

Hester added one more detail, and it mattered greatly. The dead lady's husband, she said, was away abroad at the time, but the Countess arranged for the burial to take place in Cumberland, in the same grave as the dead woman's mother. Count Fosco himself went down in deep mourning to attend it. The funeral was

handsome, the coffin expensive, and everything was done with outward dignity. That too formed part of the design. A splendid burial can hide a dark truth as easily as a poor one.

At the end of these dry statements stood the hardest words of all, because they stood on stone. The tomb in Limmeridge churchyard recorded that Laura, Lady Glyde, daughter of Philip Fairlie and wife of Sir Percival Glyde, had died on July twenty-fifth, 1850. What had begun in whispers, warnings, and strange meetings by moonlight had been driven now into the shape of a public fact. The law had its certificate, the churchyard had its grave, and the world had its answer ready.

At that same time, far away from England, Walter Hartright was fighting his own battle to become a different man. He and his companions left Central America in the early summer of 1850, only to be wrecked in the Gulf of Mexico on the way home. He survived disease, danger, and drowning, and reached Liverpool at last on the thirteenth of October. From there he came to London that same night, hardened by hardship and resolved, at last, to face life directly instead of running from it.

He returned, however, not to the old world he had left behind. Laura Fairlie had lived in his thoughts through exile, danger, and rescue from the sea, but the England to which he came back had already placed another truth before him. Somewhere between London, St. John's Wood, and Limmeridge churchyard, the woman he had loved had been declared dead to the world. So the second great movement of the story closed with a cruel triumph. A grave bore Laura's name, and Walter Hartright was coming home to read it.

Part 18

When I returned to London from abroad, I came back a changed man. Hardship, danger, sickness, and shipwreck had done for me what sorrow alone could not do. I still carried my old love in my heart, but I no longer wished to run from my fate. I meant to face it as steadily as I could, whatever form it had now taken.

My first thought was for my mother and my sister. I sent word ahead to

Hampstead and followed as soon as I could. The joy of our meeting was great, but before long I saw another feeling in my mother's face. There was pity in it, and sorrow too. I understood at once that some news connected with Laura had reached her before it reached me.

I had not the courage to ask the question directly. My mother spared me only for a little while. At last the truth came before me, not in a cruel speech, but in the silent form of a newspaper notice and then in the knowledge that the story had gone farther than print. Laura Fairlie, now called Lady Glyde, had been reported dead. I cannot describe what passed in me then. There are griefs that seem at first too sudden to be real, and yet are real enough to break the heart.

I went north almost at once. The next morning I turned my back on Limmeridge House and made my way toward the churchyard. The place was quiet, the day was sinking, and the valley of the dead lay still under the cold clear light. I found the tomb and saw the black letters newly cut upon the stone. I tried to read them, and read enough. I saw her name and the date of her death, and I could bear no more.

I went to the side of the grave where nothing was written and knelt there with my head upon the stone. For a little while I let the whole past come back to me as if nothing had changed except that she had gone out of it forever. Then I heard a sound behind me, first like a breath over the grass and then like footsteps stopping near. I looked up and saw two women standing in the churchyard and looking toward the tomb.

One of them raised her veil, and I saw Marian Halcombe. But she was terribly altered. Her face was worn and wasted, her eyes were wild with suffering, and she looked at me as if some fearful judgment had fallen from heaven. Before I could speak, the second woman moved slowly forward and came to the other side of the grave. Marian cried out to me not to look. Then the woman lifted her veil.

Laura herself stood before me, living, changed, and looking at me over her own grave. No words can tell the shock of that moment. The stone declared her dead, and there she was beside it. The mind refused the fact even while the eyes received it. The whole falsehood of the past months seemed to rise around us in

one terrible instant.

I do not attempt to tell what passed in the week that followed. Even in writing afterwards, I could not bring myself to set it down fully. My heart failed me whenever I tried to look straight back at it. There had been too much confusion, too much pain, and too great a change in the purpose of all our lives. So I left that interval unrecorded and took up the story one week later, when action had at last begun to replace astonishment.

At the end of that week we were in London, hidden in a poor crowded district under another name. I had taken humble lodgings on two floors. On the upper floor I lived and worked alone. On the lower floor lived the two women who were described to the world as my sisters. I earned money by drawing and engraving for cheap papers, and Marian supported the disguise by taking in needlework. Everything about our life there, the false name, the poor rooms, the claimed relationship, and the obscure labour, was meant only to hide us in the great darkness of London.

The cruel position in which we stood was plain enough. Laura was alive, yet the world believed her dead. Another woman had been buried under her name. The law, the grave, and society itself had been turned against the person they should have protected. Marian and I, in trying to restore her, were forced to live as if we ourselves were the agents of some imposture. There was no friend of rank and no public authority ready to help us. If we failed, we risked everything and recovered nothing.

Still, the very hopelessness of the position hardened my resolve. I now understood that pity, love, and private sorrow were no longer enough. Laura's place in the world could not be won back by feeling. It could only be won back by proof. The false burial, the doctor's certificate, the journey to London, the asylum, Anne Catherick, Count Fosco, Sir Percival, and the secret hidden beneath them all had to be taken up one by one and forced into the light.

So my life began again in another form. The old Walter Hartright, the drifting drawing-master who had once suffered and then fled, was gone. In his place stood a man with one fixed object: to restore Laura to herself. Until that work was done,

obscurity, labour, patience, danger, and silence were all to be accepted as part of my daily life. The road ahead was dark, but at last I knew where it led.

Part 19

During the first days of our hidden life in London, I did not act blindly. Before beginning any fresh search, I drew from Marian every detail she could still remember that might help me later. Some of those details seemed useless at first. They concerned Sir Percival's family, old rumours connected with Blackwater, and small facts that had no clear shape when taken alone. Still, I wrote them all down. Experience had already taught me that the smallest point may become important when the right light falls on it.

Among these earlier facts, one in particular stayed in my mind. Sir Percival's father had been a strange and unhappy man, living abroad, avoiding society, and passing much of his life away from the estate that later came to his son. Marian could tell me little more than this, and little more than what neighbourhood talk had once said of the family. But even that faint knowledge had its use. It reminded me that the past behind Sir Percival was dark, broken, and only half known.

While we waited in that obscurity, I also tried to follow the last line left open to us by Anne herself. Marian had written to Mrs. Todd at the farm near Limmeridge, hoping to hear whether Mrs. Clements had ever sent back any message there after disappearing with Anne. When the answer came to the post-office we had chosen for safety, the first real turn in our favour arrived with it. Mrs. Todd had indeed heard from Mrs. Clements, and the letter she had received gave the London address where Mrs. Clements might now be found. The moment I read that address, I felt that the true investigation had begun at last.

I lost no time. The next morning I went alone to the lodging-house near Gray's Inn Road. Mrs. Clements herself opened the door. At first she did not know me, and I had to remind her of our meeting in Limmeridge churchyard and of the service I had once done Anne when she fled from those who pursued her. That memory gave me my only claim on her trust, and when it returned to her, she

asked me in immediately, full of fear and anxiety to know whether I had brought any news.

I could not tell her all that had happened. To explain the conspiracy completely would have been dangerous, and there was no use in raising hopes I did not myself feel. So I told her only that my purpose was to discover who had really caused Anne's disappearance and to bring to punishment the men whose wickedness had already ruined others dearer to me than I could say. That was enough. She was simple, slow in speech, and deeply troubled, but she understood that our roads, however different in feeling, were running toward the same end.

By careful questioning, I got her to begin at the right place. After leaving Todd's Corner, she said, she and Anne had gone first to Derby, then to London, and afterward had planned to move farther away because Anne's fear of discovery in London grew worse each time they walked out. At last they removed to Grimsby, where Mrs. Clements had relatives through her dead husband. There Anne's illness first showed itself plainly. It came on after she read in the newspapers that Laura had married Sir Percival. A doctor was called, and he found serious disease of the heart. From that time Anne had never been truly strong again.

Yet illness did not change her purpose. In Grimsby she formed the sudden fixed resolution to go back to Hampshire and speak privately with Lady Glyde. She told no full reason, except that she believed death was not far off and that she carried something in her mind which must be said to Laura before she died. Mrs. Clements tried to stop her, but the doctor feared that strong opposition might bring on another dangerous attack. So the poor woman gave way, and they returned south once more, choosing Sandon as the safest place from which Anne could secretly reach the grounds near Blackwater. It was from there that Anne made the long walks which brought her to the lake and the boat-house.

Then came the most important part of Mrs. Clements's story. After Anne had failed to meet Laura again openly and after the warning had moved nearer to action, Count Fosco and his wife carried out the deception that separated the two women forever. A letter was brought by a boy to Anne when Mrs. Clements had gone out only for a short time. Five minutes later Anne was seen leaving the house

alone, bonnet and shawl on, and she carried the letter with her. She never returned. When Mrs. Clements, half mad with fear, later made inquiries at the asylum, she was told Anne had not been brought there. She then wrote to Mrs. Catherick and got no help. From that day onward she had known nothing of Anne's fate.

That evidence did not yet give me Sir Percival's secret, but it did clear one point beyond doubt. Anne had not disappeared by chance, and she had not been recovered by ordinary legal means. She had been drawn away by trick, and Count Fosco with his wife had done the work. They had removed her from Mrs. Clements just as surely as they later removed Laura from herself. Here, at least, the line of guilt stood out plainly enough.

Still, the immediate object of my visit was not Count Fosco's guilt, but Sir Percival's secret. So I pushed the inquiry farther back into earlier years. I asked first about Anne's birth and about the old suspicion that Sir Percival might be her father. Mrs. Clements's answers disturbed that belief more than they supported it. It had indeed been clearly proved in the village that Anne was not Mr. Catherick's child. Mrs. Catherick, while still unmarried, had compromised her character and had married to save appearances. But when I asked whether Anne resembled Sir Percival, Mrs. Clements said no. When I asked whether she resembled her mother, she said no again. Mrs. Catherick, she told me, was dark and full in the face, while Anne was unlike both the mother she had and the father she was thought to have had.

I then asked whether any direct link had ever been known between Sir Percival and the house where Mrs. Catherick had lived before marriage. Again the answers were disappointing, but important in their disappointment. Sir Percival's movements before his arrival in that neighbourhood were uncertain. Some had said he came from Blackwater, some from Scotland. Mrs. Catherick had been in service at Varneck Hall for several years before her marriage, a house belonging to a man named Major Donthorne. Yet nobody whom Mrs. Clements knew had ever heard that Sir Percival was connected with that house or had ever seen him near it. I wrote down the Major's name, but the effect on my mind was already clear.

The more I looked at the evidence, the less able I was to believe that Anne's birth itself was the secret we sought. The appearances pointed one way, but the truth seemed to lie elsewhere. Sir Percival might have let the village think one shameful thing in order to hide another shameful thing still more dangerous. That thought opened a new road before me. If Anne was not his secret, Mrs. Catherick still was. Somewhere in the stolen meetings between Sir Percival and that woman, somewhere beneath the disgrace everybody had easily believed, the true clue was waiting. I left Mrs. Clements with gratitude for what she had told me, and with my purpose sharpened, not satisfied. I had not yet found the secret, but I had at last learned where not to look for it—and that was a real step forward.

Part 20

The new road before me led straight to Mrs. Catherick. If Anne was not Sir Percival's true secret, her mother was. When I found Mrs. Catherick and spoke with her, she tried at first to keep her old hard silence. But one careless test on my side broke through it. I mentioned the vestry of the church, half as a guess, and the terror that seized her told me at once that I had struck the hidden place. Sir Percival's crime, whatever else it was, was tied to Old Welmingham church, and Mrs. Catherick was not merely a witness to it. She had been mixed up in it herself.

There was another clue in her bitter contempt. She spoke of Sir Percival's great family with particular scorn "on the mother's side," and that sneer worked on my mind after I left her. It suggested that the secret might touch not only Sir Percival himself, but his right to his mother's place and name. From that point my thoughts moved steadily toward one object. If the truth had anything to do with marriage, birth, or legitimacy, then the answer might still be written in the parish records.

So the next day I went to Old Welmingham church. The place stood lonely and half ruined on rising ground, with the old vestry behind it. Before I even reached the clerk, I saw two men watching me, one of them a face I already knew from London. That was enough to tell me that Sir Percival had been warned of my movements and was prepared for me. Still, I went on. When a man has come that

far, he does not turn back because he is watched.

In the vestry I found the register and searched backward through the marriages until I reached September 1803. There, plainly entered, stood the marriage of Sir Felix Glyde and Cecilia Jane Elster. For one moment that seemed to ruin all my hopes. But I was not yet ready to give up. I copied the details and went on to Knowlesbury, where the certified duplicate of the register was kept. If the duplicate agreed with the original, the road would close. If it did not, the truth would open at once.

When the copy was brought to me and I turned again to the same page, I found the whole secret lying bare in one blank space. The marriage entry of Sir Felix Glyde and Cecilia Jane Elster was not there. The entries above and below it fell exactly into place, and between them there remained the narrow space where no such marriage had originally stood. Then I understood everything. The marriage had been inserted later into the church register and had never existed in the certified copy made years before. Sir Percival was not Sir Percival at all. He had no right to the baronetcy, no right to Blackwater, and no lawful claim to the whole life he had been living.

The discovery explained all that had once seemed wild and out of measure in him. It explained his violence, his fear, his suspicion of Anne, and his readiness to ruin Laura on mere doubt. Exposure would not merely shame him. It would strip him of name, rank, land, and place at one stroke. When I came out from that office, the secret was mine, and I knew that he would guess it was mine too. From that moment caution mattered more than triumph. Interests dearer than my own hung on every step I took.

I sent word to London and moved as carefully as I could, but Sir Percival was already at his last resources. He tried violence first, and after that he turned to the surer method. If the page in the original register could be destroyed, then the copy at Knowlesbury would prove nothing by itself to ordinary minds. A missing comparison would weaken the blow, delay the law, and perhaps save him for a little while longer. As I understood later, that calculation drove everything that followed.

That night the alarm came from Old Welmingham church. The vestry was on fire. I hurried there with others and learned at once that the clerk's keys had been taken. From inside the burning room a trapped man could be heard trying vainly to unlock the door. We forced ourselves again and again against it with a beam, while the fire grew stronger and the heat beat us back. At last the door gave way, but by then there was nothing left to save. Inside we saw only living fire from floor to roof.

The flames were beaten down at last, and what remained was carried out. Sir Percival had gone into the vestry to destroy the register and had died there instead. I told the coroner only what I could actually prove: that I had asked my way of the clerk, that I had helped when the fire came, and that I had heard the trapped man inside. I did not expose the whole conspiracy there, because the register itself had burned, and unsupported accusation would have served no practical end. Still, in my own mind the explanation was clear enough. He had stolen the keys, shut himself in, struck a light to reach the register, and been caught by the blaze before he could escape.

So Sir Percival Glyde fell, not by justice in open court, but by the desperate effort to destroy the proof of his own fraud. Yet his death did not restore Laura. The man was gone, but the false burial, the false name, and the deeper share of Count Fosco in the whole conspiracy still remained. One enemy had been struck down. The darkest one was still standing.

Part 21

After Sir Percival's death, I was left for one moment with a sense of triumph, and then almost immediately with a new warning. Mrs. Catherick sent me her long shameless narrative, and my first impulse was to tear it to pieces. But I checked myself. So far as Sir Percival was concerned, the letter only confirmed what I had already discovered. Yet it contained hints which might still be useful later in tracing Anne Catherick's father, and I therefore sealed it up and kept it. At that same time a hurried note from Marian reached me with only one urgent

message: I was to come back at once, because she had been obliged to move.

I returned to London as fast as I could and found the two sisters no longer in the lodgings where I had left them. The change had been made suddenly, not for comfort but for safety. When I was at last with Marian again, I saw at once that some new danger had come close upon them in my absence. Her manner, though controlled as ever, carried the strain of something narrowly escaped.

She then told me what had happened. Count Fosco had found our first hiding place. He had not done so by chance. On my return from my first journey to Hampshire, after I had started the inquiry against Sir Percival, I had been followed from the railway, partly by the lawyer's men and finally by the Count himself. In that way he had discovered the house, stored the knowledge away, and waited to use it only when his own interests were directly threatened.

That moment came, as Marian said, the instant he learned of Sir Percival's death. He at once concluded that my next attack would be turned on him as the dead man's partner in the conspiracy. So he made arrangements to bring the owner of the asylum, or a medical representative connected with that place, to the house where Laura was hidden. If Laura could once more be claimed as Anne Catherick, then even if he failed to seize her, he might still entangle us in endless legal confusion, discredit our position, and tie my hands at the very moment when I most needed freedom to act.

Here came the strangest part of Marian's story, and I would not have believed it if it had come from another witness. According to his own confession, Fosco had gone so far as to point out the house and to prepare the blow. But at the last moment he drew back. He claimed that he did so for Marian's sake. He told her, with that mixture of cold vanity and theatrical feeling which belonged only to him, that the one weak place in his iron nature was his horrible admiration for her, and that he had spared us once again because he could not bear to separate her from Laura.

I do not say that I trusted this explanation completely. The Count was capable of real feeling in one direction and of ruthless calculation in another. Marian herself believed at least this much: that the man who had come with Fosco left

without even looking toward our side of the house. Whether that retreat sprang from admiration, from policy, or from some mixture of both, the practical result was the same. Laura remained with us, and we were given one more interval in which to prepare ourselves.

But the respite came with a warning. Fosco had sent me his message through Marian, and the message was plain enough. If I let him alone, he would leave what I had already gained unmolested for her sake. If I moved against him rashly, I was to understand that I had not Sir Percival now to deal with, but Count Fosco, a man who “stuck at nothing.” Those words did not frighten me in the sense he intended. They instructed me. They told me that the last and strongest enemy stood clearly before me at last.

From that time I understood that impatience would ruin us. Sir Percival had fallen, but Laura was not yet restored. Her false death still stood on record, the burial still stood against her, and Count Fosco still lived with his knowledge, his skill, and his foreign connections untouched. So I held my hand. I kept Marian and Laura shut away as much as possible, allowed no strangers near them, and worked steadily at my poor engraving and drawing to maintain our secret life in the eastern quarter of London.

Those were hard months, though outwardly they were quiet. Laura slowly gained a little strength, but she did not quickly regain her old self. Marian bore everything with a courage that never failed, yet I knew too well what the strain cost her. As for me, I had only one comfort in those days. At least our poverty no longer shamed me. It had become the very condition that made our concealment possible and forced me to depend on my own hands instead of on doubtful legal helpers.

Meanwhile I kept every paper that might one day help us. Mrs. Catherick’s letter remained with me, not because it could now strike at Sir Percival, but because it might still clear the last obscurity around Anne. The woman in white had been the first living sign of the truth in my life, and even after death she was not wholly explained. I could not forget that. Yet the more immediate problem was no longer Anne’s birth. It was Fosco’s hold on the story.

So I waited and watched. I knew now that no mere accusation would serve against such a man. He must be taken at the one point where his courage and his caution crossed each other. Until that opening came, silence was wiser than attack. But I had ceased to doubt that it would come. A man like Count Fosco can hide many things, yet he cannot live without showing, somewhere and somehow, the shape of the life he truly fears.

Part 22

After Sir Percival's death, I did what Marian knew I meant to do, though neither of us had yet spoken the thought aloud. I insisted that Laura must be told, very gently and with no cruel details, that her husband was dead. Better, I said, that the truth should come from loving lips than from accident or public report. Marian understood me before I explained myself fully, and she agreed. So Laura learned that the false marriage which had darkened her life was ended at last, and from that day his name was no more spoken among us.

Time then began to work more kindly than it had worked for many months before. We returned, little by little, to our poor quiet way of living. Laura's mind was still fragile, but her spirits rose more often, and she began once more to take interest in small occupations, in drawing, in the house, and in the little daily matters that belong to peaceful life. Marian and I watched her closely, saying little, hoping much, and waiting for the right moment. At length I proposed that we should all go to the sea for a short holiday, and Marian agreed to it before Laura was told.

At the seaside, in the mild spring air, the old bond between Marian and me came back in a new form. We sat one day by the window looking over the sunlit water, and I told her plainly that if I was ever to face Count Fosco again, I must face him as Laura's husband, not as her doubtful protector. Without that right, society and law alike left me weak at the very point where I most needed strength. Marian saw the truth at once. She gave me her hand on it, and from that moment the last barrier between Laura and me was removed by the one person whose

consent mattered most.

I spoke to Laura afterwards, and I need not repeat what passed between us in detail. The love that had once been checked by duty and silence returned now without shame and without fear. Our marriage was quiet, simple, and hidden from the world, but it gave me what I had long lacked: a lawful right to guard her, act for her, and meet danger in her name. Even in happiness, however, I did not forget the work still waiting in London. My purpose to force the truth from Count Fosco went back with me unchanged.

I waited my time with patience, as I had resolved to do. Then chance, or fate, brought the opening at last. One evening, at the opera, I saw Count Fosco in a box. With him was a foreign man marked by a scar on his left cheek, a man whose presence suggested secret danger at once. More startling still, Pesca was in the theatre that evening too. The instant his eyes fell on the Count, the Count started, turned pale, and left the box in visible haste. He had recognized Pesca, and he was afraid.

I followed Pesca out at once and took him back to his lodgings, where I forced him, as gently as I could, to face the question he had never before been willing to answer. He trembled when I spoke of his life in Italy and of the reason Count Fosco might know and fear him. Little by little, with great reluctance, he admitted enough for my purpose. He belonged, or had once belonged, to a secret political brotherhood which condemned traitors among its own members with deadly certainty. Count Fosco, under another name and in another character, had once betrayed that brotherhood. Pesca himself was one of the men marked to know and recognize such a traitor if chance ever brought him face to face with him again.

Armed with that knowledge, I went without delay to Count Fosco's house. He received me alone, with his usual theatrical ease, but his hand was in a drawer and his manner left no doubt that he was ready for violence if he dared use it. I answered him with the only weapon strong enough to stop him. I showed him a note from Pesca, but unsigned, saying that if he did not hear from me before a certain hour, he would break a sealed letter in his keeping. The Count understood the whole meaning instantly. If I disappeared, his past in Italy would be revealed

to the one danger he feared beyond all others.

We then stood openly opposed to each other at last. He said I had not Sir Percival now to deal with, but Fosco, a man who would walk over lives as over stepping-stones to his own safety. I answered that I wanted justice for my wife and would accept no conditions that reduced that claim. After a hard struggle of words and wills, he gave way, though not all at once and not without trying to preserve the grandeur of his surrender. He agreed to write the confession I needed, to give me Sir Percival's letter proving Laura's journey from Blackwater on the twenty-sixth of July, and to provide the address of the flyman whose evidence would complete the proof that "Lady Glyde" had been alive after the date of her supposed death.

He wrote for hours, not like a man making a plain confession, but like a great actor enjoying his final scene. He arranged his papers, revised them, read them aloud to me with dramatic emphasis, and seemed far less troubled by the admission of his crimes than by the problem of what should become of his birds and white mice after his departure. When he had finished, he placed the documents in my hands, summoned his wife to watch me while he slept, and later went calmly on with his packing for flight. Madame Fosco, in all this, hated me with a deadly quiet hatred, but she could do nothing.

One last attempt was made to break the line between Pesca and me. I wrote a short letter authorizing the bearer to receive from Pesca the sealed packet I had left in his charge. The Count's foreign agent took it, returned with it unopened, and the Count burnt it before my eyes, saying that though he kept his promise, the matter would not end there. Then he and his wife left the house for the cab. At the door he turned back once more, half threatening me with future satisfaction "as a gentleman," and half imploring me, with his hand on his heart, to take care of Marian. Even in that last moment, his villainy and his twisted admiration stood side by side.

I watched him drive away, and almost immediately the scarred foreigner from the opera passed after him in another cab. Then I went back into the house, sat down with the papers the Count had given me, and began to read the terrible

history of the conspiracy as told by the man who had planned it. At last, the truth was not guessed, or feared, or pieced together from fragments. It was written out in his own hand.

Part 23

The papers Count Fosco left in my hands did more than accuse him. They revealed the inner shape of the whole crime. In his own proud way, he explained that Sir Percival had first drawn him into the matter through money. Percival needed help, Percival feared exposure, and Fosco saw in the business both profit and the chance to exercise his extraordinary power over weaker people.

He admitted, too, that the resemblance between Anne Catherick and Laura had been the very key of the conspiracy. Anne's failing health, her weakened mind, her fear of Sir Percival, and her old connection with Limmeridge all made her useful to the men who trapped her. Fosco did not write of her with pity. He wrote of her as a piece on a board, to be moved into place when the moment was ripe. In that alone, the full coldness of the man showed itself.

He also made clear what I had long suspected about Marian. He admired her deeply, and the admiration was real in its distorted way. But even that feeling did not make him innocent. It only made him vain, divided, and theatrical. He could spare us once, and then calmly describe the larger ruin of Laura as if it were no more than a difficult success in management.

The practical value of the papers lay elsewhere. With Fosco's confession, Sir Percival's letter, and the address of the flyman, I could at last do what had been impossible before. I went straight to Mr. Kyrle, laid the documents before him, and forced the legal side of the case into motion. There was now no room left for vague assertion. Laura's supposed death had to be tested against times, movements, witnesses, and signed evidence.

The cabman's testimony completed the line of proof. He could identify the lady taken from Blackwater toward London, and his evidence placed Laura alive in transit after the false machinery of death had already begun to move around

Anne Catherick. Once that point was fixed, the whole structure built by the certificate, the coffin, and the tomb became fatally unsound. The dead woman buried under Laura's name could no longer be treated as Laura in law or reason.

Mr. Kyrle then took the matter up with the caution of a sound lawyer and with more energy than I had expected from any man of his profession after all we had seen. Step by step, he brought the necessary persons face to face with the documents. The false dates were confronted with the true movements. The supposed death was confronted with living passage from one house to another. At last Laura's identity was established beyond honest dispute.

When that victory came, it did not come with noise or triumph. It came more quietly, and for that very reason more deeply. A wrong done with great boldness had at last been answered by patient proof. The law, which had once seemed only the servant of money and form, was now forced to give back to my wife her name, her place, and her right to exist in the world as herself.

There still remained one more dark touch to the story of Count Fosco. He had left England in haste, but he had not escaped the danger that had long followed him. The secret brotherhood he had betrayed in earlier years had not forgotten him, and before long news reached us that he had been found and killed abroad. Even at a distance, the end suited the man. He had lived by skill, secrecy, and double dealing, and he died as a marked enemy among men of his own darker world.

Yet even that end gave me no joy worth naming. The true gain was not in the fall of a villain. It was in the recovery of Laura. By the time the legal proof was complete, she had begun to grow calmer under the protection of a life no longer hidden and no longer false. She was still changed, still gentler and more fragile than she had once been, but she was restored to us and to herself.

So the long night of disguise, false burial, and silence was broken at last. My wife stood once more in the place from which she had been thrust out, and the name cut on the tomb no longer held its old power over us. But the story had not yet ended. One last movement remained, and it was the quietest of all: not exposure, not pursuit, and not fear, but home, inheritance, and the true close of

life at Limmeridge.

Part 24

After the truth had been won back and Laura's place in the world had been restored, our life grew quiet at last. There were no more sudden blows, no more disguises, and no more hidden enemies near us. We lived simply, and the steady work I now had was enough for all our needs. Peace did not make us rich, but it made us secure, and that was more than wealth could have given after all we had suffered.

The months passed gently. Laura continued to recover, not quickly, but truly. Marian remained the same faithful strength in our home that she had always been. My mother, my sister, and our old friends came back into our lives in their natural places. Even Mr. Gilmore, when he returned to us later, gave what help he could by writing his part of this history, so that the whole chain of events might stand complete.

In February of the new year, our first child was born, a son. It was a happiness so quiet and so deep that I hardly know how to write of it. After all the false death and false burial that had darkened Laura's life, here was new life in her arms, innocent, warm, and full of the future. Marian stood as his godmother, and the small christening brought together the few people who truly belonged to us.

For a time nothing more happened that need be told here. We lived modestly and happily. I worked, Laura drew a little and gained strength, Marian watched over us both, and the child grew. It seemed almost enough that sorrow had ended and common days had begun again. But the story was not yet quite finished, because the old house in Cumberland still stood waiting for its true close.

When our little Walter was six months old, I was sent to Ireland for some work connected with my newspaper drawings. I was away nearly a fortnight and wrote home regularly, except during the last few days when travel made letters uncertain. On my return to London, I arrived in the morning and found the house empty. Laura, Marian, and the child had left the day before. A note from my wife told me

only that they had gone to Limmeridge House, that I must follow at once, and that I was not to be anxious.

I caught the first train and reached Cumberland that same afternoon. My surprise was complete when I found them not merely visiting Limmeridge, but settled there in the little room that had once been mine as a studio. The old associations of the house came back on me at once. Laura stood by the drawing-table, Marian sat with the child on her lap, and for one moment the years between past and present seemed to fold together.

I asked at once what had brought them there, and whether Mr. Fairlie knew of our coming. Marian answered me with the news that changed everything. Mr. Fairlie was dead. He had been struck by paralysis and had never recovered. Mr. Kyrle had informed them of his death and had advised that they should go immediately to Limmeridge House. While she spoke, I felt the meaning drawing near, though I had not yet taken hold of it fully.

Laura came close to me, enjoying my confusion with a little of her old sweetness. She began to say, in her gentle way, that perhaps she must explain our boldness by speaking of the past. Marian stopped her at once and said there was no need to speak of the past when the future would explain everything far better. Then she rose, lifted the child in her arms, and looked at me with tears of joy in her eyes.

I answered lightly that, however bewildered I might be, I still knew my own child when I saw him. Marian laughed with the old easy gaiety that had come back to her at last. Then she asked whether I spoke so casually of one of the landed gentry of England. I stared at her, still not understanding, and she gave the child to me as if she were making a formal presentation. In that one moment the whole history of Limmeridge, of loss, recovery, and inheritance, came to its final point.

She told me, at last, who I was holding in my arms. Not only my son. Not only Laura's child. He was the next heir of the house whose peace had once been broken by fraud and cruelty. The line had come back, not through pride or ambition, but through suffering patiently endured and truth patiently won. Limmeridge, which had seemed lost in every sense, had found its future in the

little life before me.

Marian was the good angel of our lives, and it was she who spoke the final words that completed the whole long story. Looking at the child, she said, in her bright happiness, that I was now standing before *the Heir of Limmeridge*. And with those words, nothing more remained to be told.