

“THE STORY OF OUR LIVES FROM YEAR TO YEAR.”—SHAKESPEARE.

# ALL THE YEAR ROUND.

A WEEKLY JOURNAL.

CONDUCTED BY CHARLES DICKENS.

WITH WHICH IS INCORPORATED HOUSEHOLD WORDS.

N<sup>o</sup>. 44.]

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 1860

[PRICE 2d.

## THE WOMAN IN WHITE.

MISS HALCOMBE'S NARRATIVE CONTINUED.

JULY 2ND. I have a few lines more to add to this day's entry before I go to bed to-night.

About two hours after Sir Percival rose from the luncheon-table to receive his solicitor, Mr. Merriman, in the library, I left my room, alone, to take a walk in the plantations. Just as I was at the end of the landing, the library door opened, and the two gentlemen came out. Thinking it best not to disturb them by appearing on the stairs, I resolved to defer going down till they had crossed the hall. Although they spoke to each other in guarded tones, their words were pronounced with sufficient distinctness of utterance to reach my ears.

“Make your mind easy, Sir Percival,” I heard the lawyer say. “It all rests with Lady Glyde.”

I had turned to go back to my own room, for a minute or two; but the sound of Laura's name, on the lips of a stranger, stopped me instantly. I daresay it was very wrong and very discreditable to listen—but where is the woman, in the whole range of our sex, who can regulate her actions by the abstract principles of honour, when those principles point one way, and when her affections, and the interests which grow out of them, point the other?

I listened; and, under similar circumstances, I would listen again—yes! with my ear at the keyhole, if I could not

possibly manage it in any other way.

“You quite understand, Sir Percival?” the lawyer went on. “Lady Glyde is to sign her name in the presence of a witness—or of two witnesses, if you wish to be particularly careful—and is then to put her finger on the seal, and say, ‘I deliver this as my act and deed.’ If that is done in a week's time, the arrangement will be perfectly successful, and the anxiety will be all over. If not——”

“What do you mean by ‘if not?’” “asked Sir Percival, angrily. “If the thing *must* be done, it *shall* be done. I promise you that, Merriman.”

“Just so, Sir Percival—just so; but there are two alternatives in all transactions; and we lawyers like to look both of them in the face boldly. If through any extraordinary circumstance the arrangement should *not* be made, I think I may be able to get the parties to accept bills at three months. But how the money is to be raised when the bills fall due——”

“Damn the bills! The money is only to be got in one way; and in that way, I tell you again, it *shall* be got. Take a glass of wine, Merriman, before you go.”

“Much obliged, Sir Percival; I have not a moment to lose if I am to catch the up-train. You will let me know as soon as the arrangement is complete? and you will not forget the caution I recommended——”

“Of course I won't. There's the dog-cart at the door for you. Jump in. My groom will get you to the station in no time. Benjamin, drive like mad! If Mr. Merriman misses the train, you lose your



place. Hold fast, Merriman, and if you are upset, trust to the devil to save his own." With that parting benediction, the baronet turned about, and walked back to the library.

I had not heard much; but the little that had reached my ears was enough to make me feel uneasy. The "something" that "had happened," was but too plainly a serious money-embarrassment; and Sir Percival's relief from it depended upon Laura. The prospect of seeing her involved in her husband's secret difficulties filled me with dismay, exaggerated, no doubt, by my ignorance of business and my settled distrust of Sir Percival. Instead of going out, as I had proposed, I went back immediately to Laura's room to tell her what I had heard.

She received my bad news so composedly as to surprise me. She evidently knows more of her husband's character and her husband's embarrassments than I have suspected up to this time.

"I feared as much," she said, "when I heard of that strange gentleman who called, and declined to leave his name."

"Who do you think the gentleman was, then?" I asked.

"Some person who has heavy claims on Sir Percival," she answered; "and who has been the cause of Mr. Merriman's visit here to-day."

"Do you know anything about those claims?"

"No; I know no particulars."

"You will sign nothing, Laura, without first looking at it?"

"Certainly not, Marian. Whatever I can harmlessly and honestly do to help him I will do—for the sake of making your life and mine, love, as easy and as happy as possible. But I will do nothing, ignorantly, which we might, one day, have reason to feel ashamed of. Let us say no more about it, now. You have got your hat on—suppose we go and dream away the afternoon in the grounds?"

On leaving the house, we directed our steps to the nearest shade. As we passed an open space among the trees in

front of the house, there was Count Fosco, slowly walking backwards and forwards on the grass, sunning himself in the full blaze of the hot July afternoon. He had a broad straw hat on, with a violet-coloured ribbon round it. A blue blouse, with profuse white fancy-work over the bosom, covered his prodigious body, and was girt about the place where his waist might once have been, with a broad scarlet leather belt. Nankeen trousers, displaying more white fancy-work over the ankles, and purple morocco slippers adorned his lower extremities. He was singing Figaro's famous song in the Barber of Seville, with that crisply fluent vocalisation which is never heard from any other than an Italian throat; accompanying himself on the concertina, which he played with ecstatic throwings-up of his arms, and graceful twistings, and turnings of his head, like a fat St. Cecilia masquerading in male attire. "Figaro quà! Figaro là! Figaro sù! Figaro giù!" sang the Count, jauntily tossing up the concertina at arms' length, and bowing to us, on one side of the instrument, with the airy grace and elegance of Figaro himself at twenty years of age.

"Take my word for it, Laura, that man knows something of Sir Percival's embarrassments," I said, as we returned the Count's salutation from a safe distance.

"What makes you think that?" she asked.

"How should he have known, otherwise, that Mr. Merriman was Sir Percival's solicitor?" I rejoined. "Besides, when I followed you out of the luncheon-room, he told me, without a single word of inquiry on my part, that something had happened. Depend upon it, he knows more than we do."

"Don't ask him any questions, if he does. Don't take him into our confidence!"

"You seem to dislike him, Laura, in a very determined manner. What has he said or done to justify you?"

"Nothing, Marian. On the contrary, he was all kindness and attention on our journey home, and he several times



checked Sir Percival's outbreaks of temper, in the most considerate manner towards *me*. Perhaps, I dislike him because he has so much more power over my husband than I have. Perhaps it hurts my pride to be under any obligations to his interference. All I know is, that I *do* dislike him."

The rest of the day and the evening passed quietly enough. The Count and I played at chess. For the first two games he politely allowed me to conquer him; and then, when he saw that I had found him out, begged my pardon, and, at the third game, checkmated me in ten minutes. Sir Percival never once referred, all through the evening, to the lawyer's visit. But either that event, or something else, had produced a singular alteration for the better in him. He was as polite and agreeable to all of us, as he used to be in the days of his probation at Limmeridge; and he was so amazingly attentive and kind to his wife, that even icy Madame Fosco was roused into looking at him with a grave surprise. What does this mean? I think I can guess; I am afraid Laura can guess; and I am quite sure Count Fosco knows. I caught Sir Percival looking at him for approval more than once in the course of the evening.

3rd. A day of events. I most fervently hope and pray I may not have to add, a day of disasters as well.

Sir Percival was as silent at breakfast as he had been the evening before, on the subject of the mysterious "arrangement" (as the lawyer called it), which is hanging over our heads. An hour afterwards, however, he suddenly entered the morning-room, where his wife and I were waiting, with our hats on, for Madame Fosco to join us; and inquired for the Count.

"We expect to see him here directly," I said.

"The fact is," Sir Percival went on, walking nervously about the room, "I want Fosco and his wife in the library, for a mere business formality; and I want you there, Laura, for a minute, too." He

stopped, and appeared to notice, for the first time, that we were in our walking costume. "Have you just come in?" he asked, "or were you just going out?"

"We were all thinking of going to the lake this morning," said Laura. "But if you have any other arrangement to propose——"

"No, no," he answered, hastily. "My arrangement can wait. After lunch will do as well for it, as after breakfast. All going to the lake, eh? A good idea. Let's have an idle morning; I'll be one of the party."

There was no mistaking his manner, even if it had been possible to mistake the uncharacteristic readiness which his words expressed, to submit his own plans and projects to the convenience of others. He was evidently relieved at finding any excuse for delaying the business formality in the library, to which his own words had referred. My heart sank within me, as I drew the inevitable inference.

The Count and his wife joined us, at that moment. The lady had her husband's embroidered tobacco-pouch, and her store of paper in her hand, for the manufacture of the eternal cigarettes. The gentleman, dressed, as usual, in his blouse and straw hat, carried the gay little pagoda-cage, with his darling white mice in it, and smiled on them, and on us, with a bland amiability which it was impossible to resist.

"With your kind permission," said the Count, "I will take my small family, here — my poor-little-harmless-pretty-Mouseys, out for an airing along with us. There are dogs about the house, and shall I leave my forlorn white children at the mercies of the dogs? Ah, never!"

He chirruped paternally at his small white children through the bars of the pagoda; and we all left the house for the lake.

In the plantation, Sir Percival strayed away from us. It seems to be part of his restless disposition always to separate himself from his companions on these occasions, and always to occupy himself, when he is alone, in cutting new walking-sticks for his own use. The mere



act of cutting and lopping, at hazard, appears to please him. He has filled the house with walking-sticks of his own making, not one of which he ever takes up for a second time. When they have been once used, his interest in them is all exhausted, and he thinks of nothing but going on, and making more.

At the old boat-house, he joined us again. I will put down the conversation that ensued, when we were all settled in our places, exactly as it passed. It is an important conversation, so far as I am concerned, for it has seriously disposed me to distrust the influence which Count Fosco has exercised over my thoughts and feelings, and to resist it, for the future, as resolutely as I can.

The boat-house was large enough to hold us all; but Sir Percival remained outside, trimming the last new stick with his pocket-axe. We three women found plenty of room on the large seat. Laura took her work, and Madame Fosco began her cigarettes. I, as usual, had nothing to do. My hands always were, and always will be, as awkward as a man's. The Count good-humouredly took a stool, many sizes too small for him, and balanced himself on it with his back against the side of the shed, which creaked and groaned under his weight. He put the pagoda-cage on his lap, and let out the mice to crawl over him as usual. They are pretty, innocent-looking little creatures; but the sight of them creeping about a man's body is, for some reason, not pleasant to me. It excites a strange, responsive creeping in my own nerves; and suggests hideous ideas of men dying in prison, with the crawling creatures of the dungeon preying on them undisturbed.

The morning was windy and cloudy; and the rapid alternations of shadow and sunlight over the waste of the lake, made the view look doubly wild, weird, and gloomy.

"Some people call that picturesque," said Sir Percival, pointing over the wide prospect with his half-finished walking-stick. "I call it a blot on a gentleman's property. In my great-grandfather's time,

the lake flowed to this place. Look at it now! It is not four feet deep anywhere, and it is all puddles and pools. I wish I could afford to drain it, and plant it all over. My bailiff (a superstitious idiot) says he is quite sure the lake has a curse on it, like the Dead Sea. What do you think, Fosco? It looks just the place for a murder, doesn't it?"

"My good Percival!" remonstrated the Count. "What is your solid English sense thinking of? The water is too shallow to hide the body; and there is sand everywhere to print off the murderer's footsteps. It is, upon the whole, the very worst place for a murder that I ever set my eyes on."

"Humbug!" said Sir Percival, cutting away fiercely at his stick. "You know what I mean. The dreary scenery—the lonely situation. If you choose to understand me, you can—if you don't choose, I am not going to trouble myself to explain my meaning."

"And why not," asked the Count, "when your meaning can be explained by anybody in two words? If a fool was going to commit a murder, your lake is the first place he would choose for it. If a wise man was going to commit a murder, your lake is the last place he would choose for it. Is that your meaning? If it is, there is your explanation for you, ready made. Take it Percival, with your good Fosco's blessing."

Laura looked at the Count, with her dislike for him appearing a little too plainly in her face. He was so busy with his mice that he did not notice her.

"I am sorry to hear the lake-view connected with anything so horrible as the idea of murder," she said. "And if Count Fosco must divide murderers into classes, I think he has been very unfortunate in his choice of expressions. To describe them as fools only, seems like treating them with an indulgence to which they have no claim. And to describe them as wise men, sounds to me like a downright contradiction in terms. I have always heard that truly wise men are truly good men, and have a horror of crime."

"My dear lady," said the Count,



“those are admirable sentiments; and I have seen them stated at the tops of copy-books.” He lifted one of the white mice in the palm of his hand, and spoke to it in his whimsical way. “My pretty little smooth white rascal,” he said, “here is a moral lesson for you. A truly wise Mouse is a truly good Mouse. Mention that, if you please, to your companions, and never gnaw at the bars of your cage again as long as you live.”

“It is easy to turn everything into ridicule,” said Laura, resolutely; “but you will not find it quite so easy, Count Fosco, to give me an instance of a wise man who has been a great criminal.”

The Count shrugged his huge shoulders, and smiled on Laura in the friendliest manner.

“Most true!” he said. “The fool’s crime is the crime that is found out; and the wise man’s crime is the crime that is not found out. If I could give you an instance, it would not be the instance of a wise man. Dear Lady Glyde, your sound English common sense has been too much for me. It is checkmate for *me* this time, Miss Halcombe—ha?”

“Stand to your guns, Laura,” sneered Sir Percival, who had been listening in his place at the door. “Tell him, next, that crimes cause their own detection. There’s another bit of copy-book morality for you, Fosco. Crimes cause their own detection. What infernal humbug!”

“I believe it to be true,” said Laura, quietly.

Sir Percival burst out laughing; so violently, so outrageously, that he quite startled us all—the Count more than any of us.

“I believe it, too,” I said, coming to Laura’s rescue.

Sir Percival, who had been unaccountably amused at his wife’s remark, was, just as unaccountably, irritated by mine. He struck the new walking-stick savagely on the sand, and walked away from us.

“Poor, dear Percival!” cried Count Fosco, looking after him gaily; “he is the

victim of English spleen. But, my dear Miss Halcombe, my dear Lady Glyde, do you really believe that crimes cause their own detection? And you, my angel,” he continued, turning to his wife, who had not uttered a word yet, “do you think so too?”

“I wait to be instructed,” replied the Countess, in tones of freezing reproof, intended for Laura and me, “before I venture on giving my opinion in the presence of well-informed men.”

“Do you, indeed?” I said. “I remember the time, Countess, when you advocated the Rights of Women—and freedom of female opinion was one of them.”

“What is your view of the subject, Count?” asked Madame Fosco, calmly proceeding with her cigarettes, and not taking the least notice of me.

The Count stroked one of his white mice reflectively with his chubby little-finger before he answered.

“It is truly wonderful,” he said, “how easily Society can console itself for the worst of its short-comings with a little bit of clap-trap. The machinery it has set up for the detection of crime is miserably ineffective—and yet only invent a moral epigram, saying that it works well, and you blind everybody to its blunders, from that moment. Crimes cause their own detection, do they? And murder will out (another moral epigram), will it? Ask Coroners who sit at inquests in large towns if that is true, Lady Glyde. Ask secretaries of life-assurance companies if that is true, Miss Halcombe. Read your own public journals. In the few cases that get into the newspapers, are there not instances of slain bodies found, and no murderers ever discovered? Multiply the cases that are reported by the cases that are *not* reported, and the bodies that are found by the bodies that are *not* found; and what conclusion do you come to? This. That there are foolish criminals who are discovered, and wise criminals who escape. The hiding of a crime, or the detection of a crime, what is it? A trial of skill between the police on one side, and the individual



on the other. When the criminal is a brutal, ignorant fool, the police, in nine cases out of ten, win. When the criminal is a resolute, educated, highly-intelligent man, the police, in nine cases out of ten, lose. If the police win, you generally hear all about it. If the police lose, you generally hear nothing. And on this tottering foundation you build up your comfortable moral maxim that Crime causes its own detection! Yes—all the crime *you* know of. And, what of the rest?"

"Devilish true, and very well put," cried a voice at the entrance of the boat-house. Sir Percival had recovered his equanimity, and had come back while we were listening to the Count.

"Some of it may be true," I said; "and all of it may be very well put. But I don't see why Count Fosco should celebrate the victory of the criminal over society with so much exultation, or why you, Sir Percival, should applaud him so loudly for doing it."

"Do you hear that, Fosco?" asked Sir Percival, with a sneer. "Take my advice, and make your peace with your audience. Tell them Virtue's a fine thing—they like that, I can promise you."

The Count laughed inwardly and silently; and two of the white mice in his waistcoat, alarmed by the internal convulsion going on beneath them, darted out in a violent hurry, and scrambled into their cage again.

"The ladies, my good Percival, shall tell *me* about virtue," he said. "They are better authorities than I am; for they know what virtue is, and I don't."

"You hear him?" said Sir Percival. "Isn't it awful?"

"It is true," said the Count, quietly. "I am a citizen of the world, and I have met, in my time, with so many different sorts of virtue, that I am puzzled, in my old age, to say which is the right sort and which is the wrong. Here, in England, there is one virtue. And there, in China, there is another virtue. And John Englishman says my virtue is the genuine virtue. And John Chinaman says my virtue is the genuine virtue. And I say Yes

to one, or No to the other, and am just as much bewildered about it in the case of John with the top-boots as I am in the case of John with the pigtail. Ah, nice little Mousey! come, kiss me. What is your own private notion of a virtuous man, my pret-pret-pretty? A man who keeps you warm, and gives you plenty to eat. And a good notion, too, for it is intelligible, at the least."

"Stay a minute, Count," I interposed. "Accepting your illustration, surely we have one unquestionable virtue in England, which is wanting in China. The Chinese authorities kill thousands of innocent people, on the most horribly frivolous pretexts. We, in England, are free from all guilt of that kind—we commit no such dreadful crime—we abhor reckless bloodshed, with all our hearts."

"Quite right, Marian," said Laura. "Well thought of, and well expressed."

"Pray allow the Count to proceed," said Madame Fosco, with stern civility. "You will find, young ladies, that *he* never speaks without having excellent reasons for all that he says."

"Thank you, my angel," replied the Count. "Have a bonbon?" He took out of his pocket a pretty little inlaid box, and placed it open on the table. "Chocolat à la Vanille," cried the impenetrable man, cheerfully rattling the sweetmeats in the box, and bowing all round. "Offered by Fosco as an act of homage to the charming society."

"Be good enough to go on, Count," said his wife, with a spiteful reference to myself. "Oblige me by answering Miss Halcombe."

"Miss Halcombe is unanswerable," replied the polite Italian—"that is to say, so far as she goes. Yes! I agree with her. John Bull does abhor the crimes of John Chinaman. He is the quickest old gentleman at finding out the faults that are his neighbours', and the slowest old gentleman at finding out the faults that are his own, who exists on the face of creation. Is he so very much better in his way, than the people whom he condemns in their way? English Society, Miss



Halcombe, is as often the accomplice, as it is the enemy of crime. Yes! yes! Crime is in this country what crime is in other countries—a good friend to a man and to those about him, as often as it is an enemy. A great rascal provides for his wife and family. The worse he is, the more he makes them the objects for your sympathy. He often provides, also, for himself. A profligate spendthrift who is always borrowing money, will get more from his friends than the rigidly honest man who only borrows of them once, under pressure of the direst want. In the one case, the friends will not be at all surprised, and they will give. In the other case, they will be very much surprised, and they will hesitate. Is the prison that Mr. Scoundrel lives in, at the end of his career, a more uncomfortable place than the workhouse that Mr. Honesty lives in at the end of *his* career? When John-Howard-Philanthropist wants to relieve misery, he goes to find it in prisons, where crime is wretched—not in huts and hovels, where virtue is wretched too. Who is the English poet who has won the most universal sympathy—who makes the easiest of all subjects for pathetic writing and pathetic painting? That nice young person who began life with a forgery, and ended it by a suicide—your dear, romantic, interesting Chatterton. Which gets on best, do you think, of two poor starving dressmakers—the woman who resists temptation, and is honest, or the woman who falls under temptation, and steals? You all know that the stealing is the making of that second woman's fortune—it advertises her from length to breadth of good-humoured, charitable England—and she is relieved, as the breaker of a commandment, when she would have been left to starve, as the keeper of it. Come here, my jolly little Mouse! Hey! presto! pass! I transform you, for the time being, into a respectable lady. Stop there, in the palm of my great big hand, my dear, and listen. You marry the poor man whom you love, Mouse; and one half your friends pity, and the other half blame you. And, now, on the contrary, you

sell yourself for gold to a man you don't care for; and all your friends rejoice over you; and a minister of public worship sanctions the base horror of the vilest of all human bargains; and smiles and smirks afterwards at your table, if you are polite enough to ask him to breakfast. Hey! presto! pass! Be a mouse again, and squeak. If you continue to be a lady much longer, I shall have you telling me that Society abhors crime—and then, Mouse, I shall doubt if your own eyes and ears are really of any use to you. Ah! I am a bad man, Lady Glyde, am I not? I say what other people only think; and when all the rest of the world is in a conspiracy to accept the mask for the true face, mine is the rash hand that tears off the plump pasteboard, and shows the bare bones beneath. I will get up on my big, elephant's legs, before I do myself any more harm in your amiable estimations—I will get up, and take a little airy walk of my own. Dear ladies, as your excellent Sheridan said, I go—and leave my character behind me.”

He got up; put the cage on the table; and paused, for a moment, to count the mice in it. “One, two, three, four—— Ha!” he cried, with a look of horror, “where, in the name of Heaven, is the fifth—the youngest, the whitest, the most amiable of all—my Benjamin of mice!”

Neither Laura nor I were in any favourable disposition to be amused. The Count's glib cynicism had revealed a new aspect of his nature from which we both recoiled. But it was impossible to resist the comical distress of so very large a man at the loss of so very small a mouse. We laughed, in spite of ourselves; and when Madame Fosco rose to set the example of leaving the boat-house empty, so that her husband might search it to its remotest corners, we rose also to follow her out.

Before we had taken three steps, the Count's quick eye discovered the lost mouse under the seat that we had been occupying. He pulled aside the bench; took the little animal up in his hand; and then suddenly stopped, on his knees, looking intently at a particular place on the



ground just beneath him.

When he rose to his feet again, his hand shook so that he could hardly put the mouse back in the cage, and his face was of a faint livid yellow hue all over.

"Percival!" he said, in a whisper. "Percival! come here."

Sir Percival had paid no attention to any of us, for the last ten minutes. He had been entirely absorbed in writing figures on the sand, and then rubbing them out again, with the point of his stick.

"What's the matter, now?" he asked, lounging carelessly into the boat-house.

"Do you see nothing, there?" said the Count, catching him nervously by the collar with one hand, and pointing with the other to the place near which he had found the mouse.

"I see plenty of dry sand," answered Sir Percival; "and a spot of dirt in the middle of it."

"Not dirt," whispered the Count, fastening the other hand suddenly on Sir Percival's collar, and shaking it in his agitation. "Blood."

Laura was near enough to hear the last word, softly as he whispered it. She turned to me with a look of terror.

"Nonsense, my dear," I said. "There is no need to be alarmed. It is only the blood of a poor little stray dog."

Everybody was astonished, and everybody's eyes were fixed on me inquiringly.

"How do you know that?" asked Sir Percival, speaking first.

"I found the dog here, dying, on the day when you all returned from abroad," I replied. "The poor creature had strayed into the plantation, and had been shot by your keeper."

"Whose dog was it?" inquired Sir Percival. "Not one of mine?"

"Did you try to save the poor thing?" asked Laura, earnestly. "Surely you tried to save it, Marian?"

"Yes," I said; "the housekeeper and I both did our best—but the dog was mortally wounded, and he died under our hands."

"Whose dog was it?" persisted Sir

Percival, repeating his question a little irritably. "One of mine?"

"No; not one of yours."

"Whose then? Did the housekeeper know?"

The housekeeper's report of Mrs. Catherick's desire to conceal her visit to Blackwater Park from Sir Percival's knowledge, recurred to my memory the moment he put that last question; and I half doubted the discretion of answering it. But, in my anxiety to quiet the general alarm, I had thoughtlessly advanced too far to draw back, except at the risk of exciting suspicions, which might only make matters worse. There was nothing for it but to answer at once, without reference to results.

"Yes," I said. "The housekeeper knew. She told me it was Mrs. Catherick's dog."

Sir Percival had hitherto remained at the inner end of the boat-house with Count Fosco, while I spoke to him from the door. But the instant Mrs. Catherick's name passed my lips, he pushed by the Count roughly, and placed himself face to face with me, under the open daylight.

"How came the housekeeper to know it was Mrs. Catherick's dog?" he asked, fixing his eyes on mine with a frowning interest and attention, which half angered, half startled me.

"She knew it," I said, quietly, "because Mrs. Catherick brought the dog with her."

"Brought it with her? Where did she bring it with her?"

"To this house."

"What the devil did Mrs. Catherick want at this house?"

The manner in which he put the question was even more offensive than the language in which he expressed it. I marked my sense of his want of common politeness, by silently turning away from him.

Just as I moved, the Count's persuasive hand was laid on his shoulder, and the Count's mellifluous voice interposed to quiet him.

"My dear Percival!—gently—





gently.”

Sir Percival looked around in his angriest manner. The Count only smiled, and repeated the soothing application.

“Gently, my good friend—gently!”

Sir Percival hesitated—followed me a few steps—and, to my great surprise, offered me an apology.

“I beg your pardon, Miss Halcombe,” he said. “I have been out of order lately; and I am afraid I am a little irritable. But I should like to know what Mrs. Catherick could possibly want here. When did she come? Was the housekeeper the only person who saw her?”

“The only person,” I answered, “so far as I know.”

The Count interposed again.

“In that case, why not question the housekeeper?” he said. “Why not go, Percival, to the fountain-head of information at once?”

“Quite right!” said Sir Percival. “Of course the housekeeper is the first person to question. Excessively stupid of me not to see it myself.” With those words, he instantly left us to return to the house.

The motive of the Count’s interference, which had puzzled me at first, betrayed itself when Sir Percival’s back was turned. He had a host of questions to put to me about Mrs. Catherick, and the cause of her visit to Blackwater Park, which he could scarcely have asked in his friend’s presence. I made my answers as short as I civilly could, for I had already determined to check the least approach to any exchanging of confidences between Count Fosco and myself. Laura, however, unconsciously helped him to extract all my information, by making inquiries herself, which left me no alternative but to reply to her, or to appear before them all in the very unenviable and very false character of a depository of Sir Percival’s secrets. The end of it was, that, in about ten minutes’ time, the Count knew as much as I know of Mrs. Catherick, and of the events which have so strangely connected us with her daughter, Anne, from the time when Hartright met with her, to this day.

The effect of my information on him was, in one respect, curious enough. Intimately as he knows Sir Percival, and closely as he appears to be associated with Sir Percival’s private affairs in general, he is certainly as far as I am from knowing anything of the true story of Anne Catherick. The unsolved mystery in connexion with this unhappy woman is now rendered doubly suspicious, in my eyes, by the absolute conviction which I feel, that the clue to it has been hidden by Sir Percival from the most intimate friend he has in the world. It was impossible to mistake the eager curiosity of the Count’s look and manner while he drank in greedily every word that fell from my lips. There are many kinds of curiosity, I know—but there is no misinterpreting the curiosity of blank surprise: if I ever saw it in my life, I saw it in the Count’s face.

While the questions and answers were going on, we had all been strolling quietly back, through the plantation. As soon as we reached the house, the first object that we saw in front of it was Sir Percival’s dog-cart, with the horse put to and the groom waiting by it in his stable-jacket. If these unexpected appearances were to be trusted, the examination of the housekeeper had produced important results already.

“A fine horse, my friend,” said the Count, addressing the groom with the most engaging familiarity of manner, “You are going to drive out?”

“I am not going, sir,” replied the man, looking at his stable-jacket, and evidently wondering whether the foreign gentleman took it for his livery. “My master drives himself.”

“Aha?” said the Count, “does he indeed? I wonder he gives himself the trouble when he has got you to drive for him? Is he going to fatigue that nice, shining, pretty horse by taking him very far, to-day?”

“I don’t know, sir,” answered the man. “The horse is a mare, if you please, sir. She’s the highest-couraged thing we’ve got in the stables. Her name’s Brown Molly, sir; and she’ll go till she



drops. Sir Percival usually takes Isaac of York for the short distances.”

“And your shining courageous Brown Molly for the long?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Logical inference, Miss Halcombe,” continued the Count, wheeling round briskly, and addressing me: “Sir Percival is going a long distance to-day.”

I made no reply. I had my own inferences to draw, from what I knew through the housekeeper and from what I saw before me; and I did not choose to share them with Count Fosco.

When Sir Percival was in Cumberland (I thought to myself), he walked away a long distance, on Anne’s account, to question the family at Todd’s Corner. Now he is in Hampshire, is he going to drive away a long distance, on Anne’s account again, to question Mrs. Catherick at Welmingham?

We all entered the house. As we crossed the hall, Sir Percival came out from the library to meet us. He looked hurried and pale and anxious—but, for all that, he was in his most polite mood, when he spoke to us.

“I am sorry to say, I am obliged to leave you,” he began—“a long drive—a matter that I can’t very well put off. I shall be back in good time to-morrow—but, before I go, I should like that little business-formality, which I spoke of this morning, to be settled. Laura, will you come into the library? It won’t take a minute—a mere formality. Countess, may I trouble you also? I want you and the Countess, Fosco, to be witnesses to a signature—nothing more. Come in at once, and get it over.”

He held the library door open until they had passed in, followed them, and shut it softly.

I remained, for a moment afterwards, standing alone in the hall, with my heart beating fast, and my mind misgiving me sadly. Then, I went on to the staircase, and ascended slowly to my own room.

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First published 25 February 1860  
*All The Year Round* Vol.II No.44 pp.405-411

