

'And he persuaded you to write to Laura,' I said, trying to keep my voice calm and quiet.

'Yes, he urged me – in fact, practically *ordered* me – to invite Laura here at once. She was too nervous and upset to be of any use to you in the sick-room, he said, and the situation with Sir Percival was growing more dangerous every day. There was no trouble with the journey, because he and his wife had just rented a house in London. So Laura could travel up to London, stay the night with them, and travel on to Cumberland the next day.'

'So you wrote the letter and gave it to him,' I said.

'Where was the harm in it? In any case, I never for a moment thought that Laura would leave you alone when you were so ill. And how was I to know what shocking event was about to take place? No one could possibly say that I was to blame . . .'



I know now exactly who was to blame, but it took quite a time to put all the different pieces of information together. When I first began to be aware of my surroundings again during my recovery, I knew nothing, of course, about the letters. I knew only that I was not in my usual bedroom and there was a foreign lady looking after me. I had no idea who she was and she would not answer any of my questions. So I was very relieved a few days later when the familiar face of Mrs Michelson appeared.

'Oh, Mrs Michelson,' I said, 'I'm so glad to see you. Please tell me what's been happening.'

'You've had typhus fever, Miss Halcombe. You've been very ill. But you're getting stronger now, I'm happy to say.'

'Typhus! No wonder I feel so weak. And my sister, Lady Glyde – I do hope she didn't catch the infection?'

'No, no, she didn't.'

Mrs Michelson would not look me in the face, and I began to feel worried. Was she afraid to tell me something?

'Is my sister ill? Please, Mrs Michelson, I must know!'

'No, she's not ill. But . . . but she's not here. She went away yesterday to London, and is going on to Limmeridge today.'

I stared at her. Laura gone? I could not believe it. What did it mean? Had something terrible happened? I remembered the conversation I heard during the night on the verandah roof, and my heart filled with fear.

'And Sir Percival . . .?' I could not finish my question.

'Sir Percival left the house last night, to go abroad,' she said. 'The Count and Countess have gone to London, and the servants have all been dismissed, except for a cook and the gardener. You and I are the only people living in the house, Miss Halcombe.'

The shock of this news was so great that I felt faint. Mrs Michelson hurried to fetch me a glass of water.

'Oh, Miss Halcombe, I'm sorry,' she said. 'Try not to worry. You must rest now, and try to sleep a little.'

Later, when I felt stronger, we talked again. 'Tell me everything you can remember, from the day I fell ill,' I begged Mrs Michelson. 'I must know what happened.'

'Well, Miss Halcombe, on that first morning a servant found you, lying on your bed in a fever, holding a pen tightly in your hand. The doctor was called at once, a Mr Dawson, who said you were very ill. The Countess and I acted as your nurses – Lady Glyde wanted to help, but she was so upset at seeing you unconscious that she couldn't stop crying.'

'Sir Percival and the Count were concerned about you too, though they seemed worried about something else as well. In fact, the Count spent three days down by the lake, at that old boat-house, and I remember he came in once when I was going through the hall. Sir Percival came rushing out of the library, saying, "Have you found her?" I didn't hear the answer and I have no idea who they were talking about.'