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[Authors](#)
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[Man and Wife](#)

[Wilkie Collins](#)

This Book:

[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 55 - The Signs Of The End

THE servant, appearing the next morning in Anne's room with the breakfast tray, closed the door with an air of mystery, and announced that strange things were going on in the house.

"Did you hear nothing last night, ma'am," she asked, "down stairs in the passage?"

"I thought I heard some voices whispering outside my room," Anne replied. "Has any thing happened?"

Extricated from the confusion in which she involved it, the girl's narrative amounted in substance to this. She had been startled by the sudden appearance of her mistress in the passage, staring about her wildly, like a woman who had gone out of her senses. Almost at the same moment "the master" had flung open the drawing-room door. He had caught Mrs. Dethridge by the arm, had dragged her into the room, and had closed the door again. After the two had remained shut up together for more than half an hour, Mrs. Dethridge had come out, as pale as ashes, and had gone up stairs trembling like a person in great terror. Some time later, when the servant was in bed, but not asleep, she had seen a light under her door, in the narrow wooden passage which separated Anne's bedroom from Hester's bedroom, and by which she obtained access to her own little sleeping-chamber beyond. She had got out of bed; had looked through the keyhole; and had seen "the master" and Mrs. Dethridge standing together examining the walls of the passage. "The master" had laid his hand upon the wall, on the side of his wife's room, and had looked at Mrs. Dethridge. And Mrs. Dethridge had looked back at him, and had shaken her head. Upon that he had said in a whisper (still with his hand on the wooden wall), "Not to be done here?" And Mrs. Dethridge had shaken her head. He had considered a moment, and had whispered again, "The other room will do! won't it?" And Mrs. Dethridge had nodded her head--and so they had parted. That was the story of the night. Early in the morning, more strange things had happened. The master had gone out, with a large sealed packet in his hand, covered with many stamps; taking his own letter to the post, instead of sending the servant with it as usual. On his return, Mrs. Dethridge had gone out next, and had come back with something in a jar which she had locked up in her own sitting-room. Shortly afterward, a working-man had brought a bundle of laths, and some mortar and plaster of Paris, which had been carefully placed together in a corner of the scullery. Last, and most remarkable in the series of domestic events, the girl had received permission to go home and see her friends in the country, on that very day; having been previously informed, when she entered Mrs. Dethridge's service, that she was not to expect to have a holiday granted to her until after Christmas. Such were the strange things which had happened in the house since the previous night. What was the interpretation to be placed on them?

The right interpretation was not easy to discover.

Some of the events pointed apparently toward coming repairs or alterations in the cottage. But what Geoffrey could have to do with them (being at the time served with a notice to quit), and why Hester Dethridge should have shown the violent agitation which had been described, were mysteries which it was impossible to penetrate.

Anne dismissed the girl with a little present and a few kind words. Under other circumstances, the incomprehensible proceedings in the house might have made her seriously uneasy. But her mind was now occupied by more pressing anxieties. Blanche's second letter (received from Hester Dethridge on the previous evening) informed her that Sir Patrick persisted in his resolution, and that he and his niece might be expected, come what might of it, to present themselves at the cottage on that day.

Anne opened the letter, and looked at it for the second time. The passages relating to Sir Patrick were expressed in these terms:

"I don't think, darling, you have any idea of the interest that you have roused in my uncle. Although he has not to reproach himself, as I have, with being the miserable cause of the sacrifice that you have made, he is quite as wretched and quite as anxious about you as I am. We talk of nobody else. He said last night that he did not believe there was your equal in the world. Think of that from a man who has such terribly sharp eyes for the faults of women in general, and such a terribly sharp tongue in talking of them! I am pledged to secrecy; but I must tell you one other thing, between ourselves. Lord Holchester's announcement that his brother refuses to consent to a separation put my uncle almost beside himself. If there is not some change for the better in your life in a few days' time, Sir Patrick will find out a way of his own--lawful or not, he doesn't care--for rescuing you from the dreadful position in which you are placed, and Arnold (with my full approval) will help him. As we understand it, you are, under one pretense or another, kept a close prisoner. Sir Patrick has already secured a post of observation near you. He and Arnold went all round the cottage last night, and examined a door in your back garden wall, with a locksmith to help them. You will no doubt hear further about this from Sir Patrick himself. Pray don't appear to know any thing of it when you see him! I am not in his confidence--but Arnold is, which comes to the same thing exactly. You will see us (I mean you will see my uncle and me) to-morrow, in spite of the brute who keeps you under lock and key. Arnold will not accompany us; he is not to be trusted (he owns it himself) to control his indignation. Courage, dearest! There are two people in the world to whom you are inestimably precious, and who are determined not to let your happiness be sacrificed. I am one of them, and (for Heaven's sake keep this a secret also!) Sir Patrick is the other."

Absorbed in the letter, and in the conflict of opposite feelings which it roused--her color rising when it turned her thoughts inward on herself, and fading again when she was reminded by it of the coming visit--Anne was called back to a sense of present events by the reappearance of the servant, charged with a message. Mr. Speedwell had been for some time in the cottage, and he was now waiting to see her down stairs.

Anne found the surgeon alone in the drawing-room. He apologized for disturbing her at that early hour.

"It was impossible for me to get to Fulham yesterday," he said, "and I could only make sure of complying with Lord Holchester's request by coming here before the time at which I receive patients at home. I have seen Mr. Delamayn, and I have requested permission to say a word to you on the subject of his health."

Anne looked through the window, and saw Geoffrey smoking his pipe--not in the back garden, as usual, but in front of the cottage, where he could keep his eye on the gate.

"Is he ill?" she asked.

"He is seriously ill," answered Mr. Speedwell. "I should not otherwise have troubled you with this interview. It is a matter of professional duty to warn you, as his wife, that he is in danger. He may be seized at any moment by a paralytic stroke. The only chance for him--a very poor one, I am bound to say--is to make him alter his present mode of life without loss of time."

"In one way he will be obliged to alter it," said Anne. "He has received notice from the landlady to quit this cottage."

Mr. Speedwell looked surprised.

"I think you will find that the notice has been withdrawn," he said. "I can only assure you that Mr. Delamayn distinctly informed me, when I advised change of air, that he had decided, for reasons of his own, on remaining here."

(Another in the series of incomprehensible domestic events! Hester Dethridge--on all other occasions the most immovable of women--had changed her mind!)

"Setting that aside," proceeded the surgeon, "there are two preventive measures which I feel bound to suggest. Mr. Delamayn is evidently suffering (though he declines to admit it himself) from mental anxiety. If he is to have a chance for his life, that anxiety must be set at rest. Is it in your power to relieve it?"

"It is not even in my power, Mr. Speedwell, to tell you what it is."

The surgeon bowed, and went on:

"The second caution that I have to give you," he said, "is to keep him from drinking spirits. He admits having committed an excess in that way the night before last. In his state of health, drinking means literally death. If he goes back to the brandy-bottle--forgive me for saying it plainly; the matter is too serious to be trifled with--if he goes back to the brandy-bottle, his life, in my opinion, is not worth five minutes' purchase. Can you keep him from drinking?"

Anne answered sadly and plainly:

"I have no influence over him. The terms we are living on here--"

Mr. Speedwell considerately stopped her.

"I understand," he said. "I will see his brother on my way home." He looked for a moment at Anne. "You are far from well yourself," he resumed. "Can I do any thing for you?"

"While I am living my present life, Mr. Speedwell, not even your skill can help me."

The surgeon took his leave. Anne hurried back up stairs, before Geoffrey could re-enter the cottage. To see the man who had laid her life waste--to meet the vindictive hatred that looked furtively at her out of his eyes--at the moment when sentence of death had been pronounced on him, was an ordeal from which every finer instinct in her nature shrank in horror.

Hour by hour, the morning wore on, and he made no attempt to communicate with her, Stranger still, Hester Dethridge never appeared. The servant came up stairs to say goodby; and went away for her holiday. Shortly afterward, certain sounds reached Anne's ears from the opposite side of the passage. She heard the strokes of a hammer, and then a noise as of some heavy piece of furniture being moved. The mysterious repairs were apparently being begun in the spare room.

She went to the window. The hour was approaching at which Sir Patrick and Blanche might be expected to make the attempt to see her.

For the third time, she looked at the letter.

It suggested, on this occasion, a new consideration to her. Did the strong measures which Sir Patrick had taken in secret indicate alarm as well as sympathy? Did he believe she was in a position in which the protection of the law was powerless to reach her? It seemed just possible. Suppose she were free to consult a magistrate, and to own to him (if words could express it) the vague presentiment of danger which was then present in her mind--what proof could she produce to satisfy the mind of a stranger? The proofs were all in her husband's favor. Witnesses could testify to the conciliatory words which he had spoken to her in their presence. The evidence of his mother and brother would show that he had preferred to sacrifice his own pecuniary interests rather than consent to part with her. She could furnish nobody with the smallest excuse, in her case, for interfering between man and wife. Did Sir Patrick see this? And did Blanche's description of what he and Arnold Brinkworth were doing point to the conclusion that they were taking the law into their own hands in despair? The more she thought of it, the more likely it seemed.

She was still pursuing the train of thought thus suggested, when the gate-bell rang.

The noises in the spare room suddenly stopped.

Anne looked out. The roof of a carriage was visible on the other side of the wall. Sir Patrick and Blanche had arrived. After an interval Hester Dethridge appeared in the garden, and went to the grating in the gate. Anne heard Sir Patrick's voice, clear and resolute. Every word he said reached her ears through the open window.

"Be so good as to give my card to Mr. Delamayn. Say that I bring him a message from Holchester House, and that I can only deliver it at a personal interview."

Hester Dethridge returned to the cottage. Another, and a longer interval elapsed. At the end of the time, Geoffrey himself appeared in the front garden, with the key in his hand. Anne's heart throbbed fast as she saw him unlock the gate, and asked herself what was to follow.

To her unutterable astonishment, Geoffrey admitted Sir Patrick without the slightest hesitation--and, more still, he invited Blanche to leave the carriage and come in!

"Let by-gones be by-gones," Anne heard him say to Sir Patrick. "I only want to do the right thing. If it's the right thing for visitors to come here, so soon after my father's death, come, and welcome. My own notion was, when you proposed it before, that it was wrong. I am not much versed in these things. I leave it to you."

"A visitor who brings you messages from your mother and your brother," Sir Patrick answered gravely, "is a person whom it is your duty to admit, Mr. Delamayn, under any circumstances."

"And he ought to be none the less welcome," added Blanche, "when he is accompanied by your wife's oldest and dearest friend."

Geoffrey looked, in stolid submission, from one to the other.

"I am not much versed in these things," he repeated. "I have said already, I leave it to you."

They were by this time close under Anne's window. She showed herself. Sir Patrick took off his hat. Blanche kissed her hand with a cry of joy, and attempted to enter the

cottage. Geoffrey stopped her--and called to his wife to come down.

"No! no!" said Blanche. "Let me go up to her in her room."

She attempted for the second time to gain the stairs. For the second time Geoffrey stopped her. "Don't trouble yourself," he said; "she is coming down."

Anne joined them in the front garden. Blanche flew into her arms and devoured her with kisses. Sir Patrick took her hand in silence. For the first time in Anne's experience of him, the bright, resolute, self-reliant old man was, for the moment, at a loss what to say, at a loss what to do. His eyes, resting on her in mute sympathy and interest, said plainly, "In your husband's presence I must not trust myself to speak."

Geoffrey broke the silence.

"Will you go into the drawing-room?" he asked, looking with steady attention at his wife and Blanche.

Geoffrey's voice appeared to rouse Sir Patrick. He raised his head--he looked like himself again.

"Why go indoors this lovely weather?" he said. "Suppose we take a turn in the garden?"

Blanche pressed Anne's hand significantly. The proposal was evidently made for a purpose. They turned the corner of the cottage and gained the large garden at the back--the two ladies walking together, arm in arm; Sir Patrick and Geoffrey following them. Little by little, Blanche quickened her pace. "I have got my instructions," she whispered to Anne. "Let's get out of his hearing."

It was more easily said than done. Geoffrey kept close behind them.

"Consider my lameness, Mr. Delamayn," said Sir Patrick. "Not quite so fast."

It was well intended. But Geoffrey's cunning had taken the alarm. Instead of dropping behind with Sir Patrick, he called to his wife.

"Consider Sir Patrick's lameness," he repeated. "Not quite so fast."

Sir Patrick met that check with characteristic readiness. When Anne slackened her pace, he addressed himself to Geoffrey, stopping deliberately in the middle of the path. "Let me give you my message from Holchester House," he said. The two ladies were still slowly walking on. Geoffrey was placed between the alternatives of staying with Sir Patrick and leaving them by themselves--or of following them and leaving Sir Patrick. Deliberately, on his side, he followed the ladies.

Sir Patrick called him back. "I told you I wished to speak to you," he said, sharply.

Driven to bay, Geoffrey openly revealed his resolution to give Blanche no opportunity of speaking in private to Anne. He called to Anne to stop.

"I have no secrets from my wife," he said. "And I expect my wife to have no secrets from me. Give me the message in her hearing."

Sir Patrick's eyes brightened with indignation. He controlled himself, and looked for an instant significantly at his niece before he spoke to Geoffrey.

"As you please," he said. "Your brother requests me to tell you that the duties of the new position in which he is placed occupy the whole of his time, and will prevent him from returning to Fulham, as he had proposed, for some days to come. Lady Holchester, hearing that I was likely to see you, has charged me with another message, from herself. She is not well enough to leave home; and she wishes to see you at Holchester House to-morrow--accompanied (as she specially desires) by Mrs. Delamayn."

In giving the two messages, he gradually raised his voice to a louder tone than usual. While he was speaking, Blanche (warned to follow her instructions by the glance her uncle had cast at her) lowered her voice, and said to Anne:

"He won't consent to the separation as long as he has got you here. He is trying for higher terms. Leave him, and he must submit. Put a candle in your window, if you can get into the garden to-night. If not, any other night. Make for the back gate in the wall. Sir Patrick and Arnold will manage the rest."

She slipped those words into Anne's ears--swinging her parasol to and fro, and looking as if the merest gossip was dropping from her lips--with the dexterity which rarely fails a woman when she is called on to assist a deception in which her own interests are concerned. Cleverly as it had been done, however, Geoffrey's inveterate distrust was stirred into action by it. Blanche had got to her last sentence before he was able to turn his attention from what Sir Patrick was saying to what his niece was saying. A quicker man would have heard more. Geoffrey had only distinctly heard the first half of the last sentence.

"What's that," he asked, "about Sir Patrick and Arnold?"

"Nothing very interesting to you," Blanche answered, readily. "I will repeat it if you like. I was telling Anne about my step-mother, Lady Lundie. After what happened that day in Portland Place, she has requested Sir Patrick and Arnold to consider themselves, for the future, as total strangers to her. That's all."

"Oh!" said Geoffrey, eying her narrowly.

"Ask my uncle," returned Blanche, "if you don't believe that I have reported her correctly. She gave us all our dismissal, in her most magnificent manner, and in those very words. Didn't she, Sir Patrick?"

It was perfectly true. Blanche's readiness of resource had met the emergency of the moment by describing something, in connection with Sir Patrick and Arnold, which had really happened. Silenced on one side, in spite of himself, Geoffrey was at the same moment pressed on the other for an answer to his mother's message.

"I must take your reply to Lady Holchester," said Sir Patrick. "What is it to be?"

Geoffrey looked hard at him, without making any reply.

Sir Patrick repeated the message--with a special emphasis on that part of it which related to Anne. The emphasis roused Geoffrey's temper.

"You and my mother have made that message up between you, to try me!" he burst out. "Damn all underhand work is what _I_ say!"

"I am waiting for your answer," persisted Sir Patrick, steadily ignoring the words which had just been addressed to him.

Geoffrey glanced at Anne, and suddenly recovered himself.

"My love to my mother," he said. "I'll go to her to-morrow--and take my wife with me, with the greatest pleasure. Do you hear that? With the greatest pleasure." He stopped to observe the effect of his reply. Sir Patrick waited impenetrably to hear more--if he had more to say. "I'm sorry I lost my temper just now," he resumed "I am badly treated--I'm distrusted without a cause. I ask you to bear witness," he added, his voice getting louder again, while his eyes moved uneasily backward and forward between Sir Patrick and Anne, "that I treat my wife as becomes a lady. Her friend calls on her--and she's free to receive her friend. My mother wants to see her--and I promise to take her to my mother's. At two o'clock to-morrow. Where am I to blame? You stand there looking at me, and saying nothing. Where am I to blame?"

"If a man's own conscience justifies him, Mr. Delamayn," said Sir Patrick, "the opinions of others are of very little importance. My errand here is performed."

As he turned to bid Anne farewell, the uneasiness that he felt at leaving her forced its way to view. The color faded out of his face. His hand trembled as it closed tenderly and firmly on hers. "I shall see you to-morrow, at Holchester House," he said; giving his arm while he spoke to Blanche. He took leave of Geoffrey, without looking at him again, and without seeing his offered hand. In another minute they were gone.

Anne waited on the lower floor of the cottage while Geoffrey closed and locked the gate. She had no wish to appear to avoid him, after the answer that he had sent to his mother's message. He returned slowly half-way across the front garden, looked toward the passage in which she was standing, passed before the door, and disappeared round the corner of the cottage on his way to the back garden. The inference was not to be mistaken. It was Geoffrey who was avoiding _her_. Had he lied to Sir Patrick? When the next day came would he find reasons of his own for refusing to take her to Holchester House?

She went up stairs. At the same moment Hester Dethridge opened her bedroom door to come out. Observing Anne, she closed it again and remained invisible in her room. Once more the inference was not to be mistaken. Hester Dethridge, also, had her reasons for avoiding Anne.

What did it mean? What object could there be in common between Hester and Geoffrey?

There was no fathoming the meaning of it. Anne's thoughts reverted to the communication which had been secretly made to her by Blanche. It was not in womanhood to be insensible to such devotion as Sir Patrick's conduct implied. Terrible as her position had become in its ever-growing uncertainty, in its never-ending suspense, the oppression of it yielded for the moment to the glow of pride and gratitude which warmed her heart, as she thought of the sacrifices that had been made, of the perils that were still to be encountered, solely for her sake. To shorten the period of suspense seemed to be a duty which she owed to Sir Patrick, as well as to herself. Why, in her situation, wait for what the next day might bring forth? If the opportunity offered, she determined to put the signal in the window that night.

Toward evening she heard once more the noises which appeared to indicate that repairs of some sort were going on in the house. This time the sounds were fainter; and they came, as she fancied, not from the spare room, as before, but from Geoffrey's room, next to it.

The dinner was later than usual that day. Hester Dethridge did not appear with the tray till dusk. Anne spoke to her, and received a mute sign in answer. Determined to see the woman's face plainly, she put a question which required a written answer on the slate; and, telling Hester to wait, went to the mantle-piece to light her candle. When she turned round with the lighted candle in her hand, Hester was gone.

Night came. She rang her bell to have the tray taken away. The fall of a strange footstep startled her outside her door. She called out, "Who's there?" The voice of the lad whom Geoffrey employed to go on errands for him answered her.

"What do you want here?" she asked, through the door.

"Mr. Delamayn sent me up, ma'am. He wishes to speak to you directly."

Anne found Geoffrey in the dining-room. His object in wishing to speak to her was, on the surface of it, trivial enough. He wanted to know how she would prefer going to Holchester House on the next day--by the railway, or in a carriage. "If you prefer driving," he said, "the boy has come here for orders, and he can tell them to send a carriage from the livery-stables, as he goes home."

"The railway will do perfectly well for me," Anne replied.

Instead of accepting the answer, and dropping the subject, he asked her to reconsider her decision. There was an absent, uneasy expression in his eye as he begged her not to consult economy at the expense of her own comfort. He appeared to have some reason of his own for preventing her from leaving the room. "Sit down a minute, and think before you decide," he said. Having forced her to take a chair, he put his head outside the door and directed the lad to go up stairs, and see if he had left his pipe in his bedroom. "I want you to go in comfort, as a lady should," he repeated, with the uneasy look more marked than ever. Before Anne could reply, the lad's voice reached them from the bedroom floor, raised in shrill alarm, and screaming "Fire!"

Geoffrey ran up stairs. Anne followed him. The lad met them at the top of the stairs. He pointed to the open door of Anne's room. She was absolutely certain of having left her lighted candle, when she went down to Geoffrey, at a safe distance from the bed-curtains. The bed-curtains, nevertheless, were in a blaze of fire.

There was a supply of water to the cottage, on the upper floor. The bedroom jugs and cans usually in their places at an earlier hour, were standing that night at the cistern. An empty pail was left near them. Directing the lad to bring him water from these resources, Geoffrey tore down the curtains in a flaming heap, partly on the bed and partly on the sofa near it. Using the can and the pail alternately, as the boy brought them, he drenched the bed and the sofa. It was all over in little more than a minute. The cottage was saved. But the bed-furniture was destroyed; and the room, as a matter of course, was rendered uninhabitable, for that night at least, and probably for more nights to come.

Geoffrey set down the empty pail; and, turning to Anne, pointed across the passage.

"You won't be much inconvenienced by this," he said. "You have only to shift your quarters to the spare room."

With the assistance of the lad, he moved Anne's boxes, and the chest of drawers, which had escaped damage, into the opposite room. This done, he cautioned her to be careful with her candles for the future--and went down stairs, without waiting to hear what she said in reply. The lad followed him, and was dismissed for the night.

Even in the confusion which attended the extinguishing of the fire, the conduct of Hester Dethridge had been remarkable enough to force itself on the attention of Anne.

She had come out from her bedroom, when the alarm was given; had looked at the flaming curtains; and had drawn back, stolidly submissive, into a corner to wait the event. There she had stood--to all appearance, utterly indifferent to the possible destruction of her own cottage. The fire extinguished, she still waited impenetrably in

her corner, while the chest of drawers and the boxes being moved--then locked the door, without even a passing glance at the scorched ceiling and the burned bed-furniture--put the key into her pocket--and went back to her room.

Anne had hitherto not shared the conviction felt by most other persons who were brought into contact with Hester Dethridge, that the woman's mind was deranged. After what she had just seen, however, the general impression became her impression too. She had thought of putting certain questions to Hester, when they were left together, as to the origin of the fire. Reflection decided her on saying nothing, for that night at least. She crossed the passage, and entered the spare room--the room which she had declined to occupy on her arrival at the cottage, and which she was obliged to sleep in now.

She was instantly struck by a change in the disposition of the furniture of the room.

The bed had been moved. The head--set, when she had last seen it, against the side wall of the cottage--was placed now against the partition wall which separated the room from Geoffrey's room. This new arrangement had evidently been effected with a settled purpose of some sort. The hook in the ceiling which supported the curtains (the bed, unlike the bed in the other room, having no canopy attached to it) had been moved so as to adapt itself to the change that had been made. The chairs and the washhand-stand, formerly placed against the partition wall, were now, as a matter of necessity, shifted over to the vacant space against the side wall of the cottage. For the rest, no other alteration was visible in any part of the room.

In Anne's situation, any event not immediately intelligible on the face of it, was an event to be distrusted. Was there a motive for the change in the position of the bed? And was it, by any chance, a motive in which she was concerned?

The doubt had barely occurred to her, before a startling suspicion succeeded it. Was there some secret purpose to be answered by making her sleep in the spare room? Did the question which the servant had heard Geoffrey put to Hester, on the previous night, refer to this? Had the fire which had so unaccountably caught the curtains in her own room, been, by any possibility, a fire purposely kindled, to force her out?

She dropped into the nearest chair, faint with horror, as those three questions forced themselves in rapid succession on her mind.

After waiting a little, she recovered self-possession enough to recognize the first plain necessity of putting her suspicions to the test. It was possible that her excited fancy had filled her with a purely visionary alarm. For all she knew to the contrary, there might be some undeniably sufficient reason for changing the position of the bed. She went out, and knocked at the door of Hester Dethridge's room.

"I want to speak to you," she said.

Hester came out. Anne pointed to the spare room, and led the way to it. Hester followed her.

"Why have you changed the place of the bed," she asked, "from the wall there, to the wall here?"

Stolidly submissive to the question, as she had been stolidly submissive to the fire, Hester Dethridge wrote her reply. On all other occasions she was accustomed to look the persons to whom she offered her slate steadily in the face. Now, for the first time, she handed it to Anne with her eyes on the floor. The one line written contained no direct answer: the words were these:

"I have meant to move it, for some time past."

"I ask you why you have moved it."

She wrote these four words on the slate: "The wall is damp."

Anne looked at the wall. There was no sign of damp on the paper. She passed her hand over it. Feel where she might, the wall was dry.

"That is not your reason," she said.

Hester stood immovable.

"There is no dampness in the wall."

Hester pointed persistently with her pencil to the four words, still without looking up--waited a moment for Anne to read them again--and left the room.

It was plainly useless to call her back. Anne's first impulse when she was alone again was to secure the door. She not only locked it, but bolted it at top and bottom. The mortise of the lock and the staples of the bolts, when she tried them, were firm. The lurking treachery--wherever else it might be--was not in the fastenings of the door.

She looked all round the room; examining the fire place, the window and its shutters, the interior of the wardrobe, the hidden space under the bed. Nothing was anywhere to be discovered which could justify the most timid person living in feeling suspicion or alarm.

Appearances, fair as they were, failed to convince her. The presentiment of some hidden treachery, steadily getting nearer and nearer to her in the dark, had rooted itself firmly in her mind. She sat down, and tried to trace her way back to the clew, through the earlier events of the day.

The effort was fruitless: nothing definite, nothing tangible, rewarded it. Worse still, a new doubt grew out of it--a doubt whether the motive which Sir Patrick had avowed (through Blanche) was the motive for helping her which was really in his mind.

Did he sincerely believe Geoffrey's conduct to be animated by no worse object than a mercenary object? and was his only purpose in planning to remove her out of her husband's reach, to force Geoffrey's consent to their separation on the terms which Julius had proposed? Was this really the sole end that he had in view? or was he secretly convinced (knowing Anne's position as he knew it) that she was in personal danger at the cottage? and had he considerably kept that conviction concealed, in the fear that he might otherwise encourage her to feel alarmed about herself? She looked round the strange room, in the silence of the night, and she felt that the latter interpretation was the likeliest interpretation of the two.

The sounds caused by the closing of the doors and windows reached her from the ground-floor. What was to be done?

It was impossible, to show the signal which had been agreed on to Sir Patrick and Arnold. The window in which they expected to see it was the window of the room in which the fire had broken out--the room which Hester Dethridge had locked up for the night.

It was equally hopeless to wait until the policeman passed on his beat, and to call for help. Even if she could prevail upon herself to make that open acknowledgment of distrust under her husband's roof, and even if help was near, what valid reason could she give for raising an alarm? There was not the shadow of a reason to justify any one in placing her under the protection of the law.

As a last resource, impelled by her blind distrust of the change in the position of the bed, she attempted to move it. The utmost exertion of her strength did not suffice to stir the heavy piece of furniture out of its place, by so much as a hair's breadth.

There was no alternative but to trust to the security of the locked and bolted door, and to keep watch through the night--certain that Sir Patrick and Arnold were, on their part, also keeping watch in the near neighborhood of the cottage. She took out her work and her books; and returned to her chair, placing it near the table, in the middle of the room.

The last noises which told of life and movement about her died away. The breathless stillness of the night closed round her.