

Lady Audley's Secret

An Adaptation of the Novel

Lady Audley's Secret

By

Mary Elizabeth Braddon

A Play

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Characters

(In Order of Appearance)

Madame Taylor	24	The former Lady Audley.
Monsieur Val	40	Medical Superintendent, <i>Maison de' Sante</i> , Villebrumeuse, Belgium
Sir Michael Audley	56	Aristocrat. Lord of Audley Court. Father of Alicia Audley
Lucy Graham	20	Governess for Dr. Dawson. The former Helen Talboys (ne' Maldon)
Luke Marks	23	Farmhand. Castle Inn proprietor
Phoebe Marks	22	Wife of Luke Marks. Maid to Lucy Graham and Lady Audley
Robert Audley	28	London barrister. Sir Michael's nephew
George Talboys	28	Helen Talboy's first husband.
Lieutenant Maldon	55	Helen Maldon's father
Georgey Talboys	5	Son of George and Helen Talboys
Alicia Audley	27	Sir Michael's daughter
Lady Audley	20	The former Lucy Graham. Wife of Sir Michael Audley
Harcourt Talboys	55	Aristocrat. Lord of Grange Heath estate. Father of George and Clara Talboys
Clara Talboys	25	Daughter of Harcourt Talboys and George's sister
Dr. Dawson	45	Sir Michael's physician and friend
Mrs. Vincent	40	Schoolmistress. Former employer of Lucy Graham
Miss Tonks	25	Teacher in Mrs. Vincent's school

Mrs. Barkamb	40	Owner of North Cottages in Wildernsea, one of which was rented to Lieutenant Maldon
Dr. Mosgrave	50	London physician specializing in mental disorders.
Inmates		
Waiter		
Woman		
Servants (2)		
Boy		
Clerk		
Locksmith		
Bailiff		

Cast Assignments

Actor One	Lady Audley (20), Madame Taylor (24), Lucy Graham (19), Clara Talboys (25)
Actor Two	Robert Audley (28), Bailiff (40)
Actor Three	Sir Michael Audley (56), Lieutenant Maldon (55), Harcourt Talboys (55), Dr. Mosgrave (50)
Actor Four	Phoebe Marks (22), Woman (30), Miss Tonks (25), Waiter (30)
Actor Five	George Talboys (28), Monsieur Val(40), Dr. Dawson (45), Luke Marks (23), Clerk (30), Locksmith (40), Servants (40)
Actor Six	Alicia Audley (27), Mrs. Vincent (40), Mrs. Barkamb (40)
Actor Seven (child)	Georgey (5), Boy (about 8)

Except for Actors One and Five, all actors serve as Inmates.

It may be helpful to place all actors on stage throughout, entering from and exiting to the sidelines, who can quickly adjust stage effects.

Time

1857-1862

Notes on the Set

While there are many different settings, they essentially break down to a few basic sets with variations. There are exterior settings at Audley Court, Grange Heath, Castle Inn and Ventnor Cemetery which will require differentiation between mansions and open air locations. There are interior settings at Audley Court, Grange Heath, Castle Inn, the asylum in Villebrumeuse, Figtree Court, several cottages, an inn and a coffee house.

The interior settings lend themselves to categorical differentiation between the mansions/chambers, cottages/inn, asylum and coffee house. Adjustment of effects within each type of location might well be minimal to facilitate scene changes.

An asylum in Villebrumeuse, Belgium, dark and foreboding. 1861. We hear voices, some laughing shrilly, some crying, others muttering gibberish. INMATES move about in the shadows. Light rises on MADAME TAYLOR, 24, attended by MONSEUR VAL, the Medical Director. SHE is seated in a wheelchair, pale and drawn, covered with a blanket. At Rise, the voices begin to coalesce and chant.

INMATES

Murderer! Murderer! Murderer! MURDERER! MURDERER!

The drawing room of a modest country house in the village of Audley, Essex. August 1856. LUCY GRAHAM, 20, sits by the window. There is a small mirror on the wall. SIR MICHAEL AUDLEY, 56, sits on a chair facing her.

SIR MICHAEL

There is no greater sin, Lucy, than that of a woman who marries a man she does not love. Deeply as my heart is set on this and deeply as I love you, I would not have you do such a thing. Nothing but misery will result from a loveless marriage.

(Silence. SHE stares out the window into the misty twilight. HE can't see HER face.)

Lucy, you heard me?

LUCY

Yes.

SIR MICHAEL

And your answer?

(Silence. Then, suddenly SHE falls on her knees in front of him)

No, Lucy. No! Not here!

LUCY

Yes, here! Poverty, poverty, trials, vexations, humiliations, deprivations! You cannot tell, you, who are amongst those for whom life is so smooth and easy. You could never guess what is endured by persons such as me. Do not ask too much of me. I cannot pretend! I cannot be blind to the advantages of such an alliance. I cannot!

SIR MICHAEL

Lucy. Speak plainly. Do you dislike me?

LUCY

Dislike you? No. No!

SIR MICHAEL

Is there anyone else you love?

LUCY

(Laughs)

I have loved no one in this world. I have always been selfish ever since babyhood.

SIR MICHAEL

I will not ask too much of you. I'm a romantic old fool, but if you do not dislike me and if you love no one else, I see no reason why we should not make a happy couple. Is it a bargain, Lucy?

LUCY

A bargain! Yes! Sir Michael! If you are willing, a bargain I am most delighted to make.

(HE lifts her and kisses her once upon the forehead.)

SIR MICHAEL

We will plan it, then, our wedding. Good night, Lucy, my dear Lady Audley.

(HE EXITS. LUCY stands and walks to the mirror. SHE looks intently in the mirror and takes two items wrapped in aging, yellowed paper from the pocket of her dress. We see a wedding ring and tiny baby shoes.)

LUCY

It is finally done! No more dependence. No more drudgery. No more humiliation. Every trace of the old life melted away, every clue to identity buried and forgotten, except these.

Audley Court. Exterior. The courtyard. A year later, August 1857. The mansion dates to the Middle Ages. Its irregular shape reflects centuries of renovations and add-ons. Each window is from a different era. Ivy covers much of the walls. In a corner of the courtyard, amid some shrubbery, sits an old well in disrepair. Nearby is Lime Tree Walk, as it is known. Lime trees overhang a graveled path, the ruins of a low wall and a fishpond, projecting the utmost tranquility. The front door to the mansion, with its thick knocker, is set on an oak turret.

A fierce and crimson sunset. LUKE MARKS sits lazily on the courtyard wall along Lime Tree Walk, whistling softly while stripping bark from a blackthorn stake. PHOEBE ENTERS from the front door. SHE hops on the wall and cuddles next to him, surprising him.

LUKE

Phoebe! You came upon me so still and sudden. I thought you an evil spirit.

PHOEBE

I can see the well from my window, Luke. I saw you sitting here. It's better talking out here than in the house, where there's always somebody listening. Are you glad to see me, Luke?

LUKE

Of course I'm glad, lass.

(HE resumes scraping, looking away from her.)

PHOEBE

You don't seem much as if you were glad. You might look at me, Luke, and tell me if you think my journey to the continent has improved me.

LUKE

It ain't put any color in your cheeks. You're as pale as you was when you went away.

PHOEBE

They say traveling makes people genteel. I went there with my lady to all manner of curious places. When I was little, Squire Horton's daughters taught me to speak a little French. I found it so nice to be able to talk to the people abroad.

LUKE

Genteel! Who wants you to be genteel? Not me! When you're my wife you won't have overmuch time for gentility. French, too! Dang me, Phoebe, I suppose when we've saved money enough to buy a bit of a farm, you'll be parleyvooring to the cows.

(HE continues cutting and chopping at a rude handle he's fashioning to the stake, whistles softly, still not looking at her.)

PHOEBE

Three months ago she was Lucy Graham, a governess. Now she's Lady Audley. What a fine thing it was for her to travel with maids and servants and a husband who worships her. She was the talk of every place. She set everybody mad with her singing, her playing, her painting, her smile and yellow, sunshiny ringlets!

LUKE

She's a lucky one marrying so nice.

PHOEBE

Indeed, undeservingly lucky. Tonight she's gone about with Sir Michael to another one of their constant dinner parties.

LUKE

Aye, it is a fine thing, good for her and good for you, now as she brought you on as her maid. I hope you'll save up your trebled wages agin we get married.

PHOEBE

A mere three months ago she was but a servant like me, toiling as a governess in Dr. Dawson's house, taking wages and working for them harder than I did? I was a lowly maid there. You should have seen her shabby clothes, Luke, worn, patched, darned and twisted, yet always looking nice upon her. Now, she give me more than ever she got from Mr. Dawson then.

LUKE

Never you mind her. Take care of yourself, Phoebe. What should you say to a public house for you and me, by-and-by? There's a deal of money to be made from a public house.

PHOEBE

(SHE finally looks directly at HIM)

Maybe I have, Luke. Maybe I have.

LUKE

(Stops his carving. Looks at HER)

What are saying, girl?

PHOEBE

As I put her away her things, I came across the keys to her jewelry casket. She never leaves the keys. She must have forgot. It was too good a chance for a look to pass up.

(SHE removes two items wrapped in aged paper from the pocket of her dress and slowly unwraps them. We see the wedding ring and tiny baby's shoes.)

This is what my lady hides in the secret drawers of her rich jewelry casket.

LUKE

It's queer rubbish to keep in such a place.

PHOEBE

I'd rather have these than any of the diamond bracelets in her case. My lady has a deep and dark secret and Luke, you shall have your public house.

A coffee house on Bridge Street, Westminster, London. About the same time. August, 1857. Late Morning. ROBERT AUDLEY sits at a table drinking coffee and reading The Times. WAITER stands at the counter. Suddenly, GEORGE TALBOYS rushes in, headed to the main counter. Recklessly, HE brushes against Robert's table, spilling his coffee. HE's unshaven and wears garb that is distinctly colonial, even backwoods, certainly most unfashionable for the London scene.

ROBERT

Sir! Be so good as to look where you're going! You might give a man warning before you trample upon him, wherever you're from.

(GEORGE stops, gasps for breath. HE makes a feeble attempt to pick up the coffee mug. HE recognizes ROBERT.)

GEORGE

Bob! I only touched British ground after dark last night! To think I should meet you so soon this morning.

ROBERT

I've seen you somewhere before, but I'll be hanged if I can remember when or where.

GEORGE

What! Do you mean to say you've forgotten George Talboys?

ROBERT

George Talboys, I'll be damned! It's been years! You look dreadful! Where did you get that garb? Where the devil have you been?

GEORGE

It's a tale, Bob, and I'm glad to share with you, but I'm anxious to retrieve a letter from my wife. She was to have sent it here. I used to frequent this place before I went abroad.

WAITER

George Talboys! We'd long ago given you up for dead. Have a seat, lad. Whatever you'll have, it's all on us.

GEORGE

Soda water. That's all for me. You must be holding a letter posted to me.

WAITER

(Looks at letter bin)

No. There's no letter for that name.

GEORGE

T-A-L-B-O-Y-S. Look closely, mate. There must be a letter.

WAITER

Brown, Sanderson, Pinchbeck. Three letters. That's all.

(GEORGE sits at ROBERT'S table covering his face with his hands. WAITER brings his soda water. ROBERT puts a consoling hand on his shoulder. Finally, GEORGE looks up.)

GEORGE

We lived splendidly in Italy as long as the two thousand pounds from my service in the cavalry held out. When it finally ran low, we had to return and board with her drunken old father. He fleeced us of the few pounds we had left. Worst, I could not find a job despite all my efforts. She finally broke down, blaming me for all of it. I'll admit I went into a rage. I fled to Australia to find the gold all the world said was there. I left my Helen asleep with our baby in her arms and a note explaining.

ROBERT

You deserted her!

GEORGE

I never looked at it that way at all. I'm as devoted today as I was the day we married. Before I left I knelt down and prayed. It was a heartfelt prayer. I kissed her and the baby and crept out of the room. Three nights after, I was in steerage, bound for Melbourne, with a digger's tools for baggage and seven shillings to my name.

ROBERT

You succeeded?

GEORGE

Not till I had despaired of success. Not till poverty and I had become close companions. I toiled through disappointment, despair, rheumatism, fever, starvation, but at the very gates of death I conquered. Not for over three years.

ROBERT

How brave you were!

GEORGE

Dogged and determined, not brave at all. Three months ago, one dreary foggy morning, up to my neck in clay and mire, half-starved, enfeebled by fever, stiff with rheumatism, I found a monster nugget under my spade. I fell down and cried like a child. A fortnight later I was headed back to England to find my wife.

ROBERT

But in all that time did you never write to her?

GEORGE

I couldn't while everything looked so bleak. The night I left Sydney, I dispatched a telegraph letter telling her that I'd soon be in England giving her this address to write to, telling me where to find her.

ROBERT

George, three years is forever. Anything might have happened. But, be optimistic. It may only be that she has not had time to respond.

(GEORGE drinks his water. Idly, HE picks up The Times,)

GEORGE

My life has been a toll of action, privation, toil, alternate hope and despair. I have had no time to think upon the chances of anything happening to my darling. What a blind, reckless fool I have been! Three years and a half and not one line, despite her occasional letters. Heaven above! What may not have happened?

(A look of complete dismay comes over GEORGE. He pushes the newspaper over to ROBERT and points to a line.)

ROBERT

(Reading)

On the 24th August, at Ventnor, Isle of Wight, Helen Talboys, aged 22.

GEORGE

Helen! My Helen! My wife, my darling, my only love! Dead, dead!

ROBERT

George, this Helen Talboys may not be your wife. There may be other Helen Talboys.

GEORGE

No! The age corresponds with hers and Talboys is such an uncommon name.

(ROBERT lays his hand gently on George's shoulder)

ROBERT

It may be a misprint for Talbot.

GEORGE

My wife is dead!

(Rises. Shakes off Robert's hand)

ROBERT

Where are you going?

GEORGE

To Ventnor, to see her grave.

ROBERT

I'll go with you, but first, you'll rest at my place and recover from your long ocean passage. We'll catch the morning train.

Ventnor Cemetery on the Isle of Wight. The next day. It's a windy day. The ocean is in the background. GEORGE, ROBERT and WOMAN stand by a gravesite.

WOMAN

I never seen or heard anything like it. This Captain Maldon, he seemed like such a forlorn man. He and his daughter, God rest her soul, came here as if on holiday, but one could easily see the girl had somtin' wrong. Day by day she sunk under the fatal malady and ten days later she was gone. Are you any relatives?

ROBERT

Yes, he's the lady's husband.

WOMAN

No! What! Him as deserted her so cruel, and left her with her pretty boy upon her poor old father's hands, which the Captain told me with tears in his poor eyes?

GEORGE

I loved her. I told her as much. I promised her I'd come back. Did she speak of me at the last?

WOMAN

She said very little from the first, but the last day she knew nobody, not even her little boy nor her poor father. Once she went off wild-like, talking about the cruel shame it was for her mother to leave her to die in a strange place. It was quite pitiful to hear her.

GEORGE

She hardly knew her mother!

(The WOMAN takes an item, wrapped in silver paper, from her pocket and gives it to GEORGE. HE stares at it and slowly opens it)

What's this? It's a tress of hair!

WOMAN

I cut it off when she lay in her coffin. Poor dear.

GEORGE

Yes, this is the dear hair that I have kissed so often when her head lay upon my shoulder. But it always had a curve in it. Now it seems smooth and straight.

WOMAN

I wouldn't know, but it's not uncommon that hair changes in illness. Sir, would you like me to order a headstone from a stonemason?

GEORGE

Yes, I would be most grateful.

(HE takes a pencil and paper from his pocket. As he writes...)

Take this to him if you would.

WOMAN

(Reads)

Sacred to the memory of Helen, the beloved wife of George Talboys who departed this life August 24, aged 22. Deeply regretted by her sorrowing husband.

(LIEUTENANT MALDON and GEORGEY TALBOYS ENTER, both shabbily dressed. MALDON uses a cane.)

GEORGE

Captain Maldon! Great heaven! Don't you recognize me?

MALDON

(Startled. Frightened)

My dear boy, I did not. You look unkempt, disheveled. Your clothes are from the bush somewhere.

GEORGE

Great heavens! Is this the way you welcome me? I come to England to find my wife died a week before my touching land and your first remark to me is about my clothes? You, her father!

MALDON

A sad shock, my dear George. If you'd only been here a week earlier.

GEORGE

If I had, I scarcely think that I would have let her die. I would have fought with death's reaper on her behalf. Oh God! Why could not my ship go down before I came to see this day?

(GEORGE paces around the grave in a fever of regret and despair. GEORGEY clings to MALDON.)

GEORGEY

I want to go home, grandpa. I'm tired. I want to go home.

GEORGE

(Looks longingly at GEORGEY)

My darling! My darling son! I am your father, come across the sea to find you.

GEORGEY

(Clinging more tightly)

I don't know you. I love grandpa and Mrs. Monks who takes care of me.

MALDON

Three months after you left us, we went down to Southampton to live. Dear Helen took on a few pupils for the piano. We managed all in all till her health failed. And here she is.

GEORGE

The boy seems fond of you, Captain Maldon.

MALDON

(Smoothing GEORGEY'S curling hair)

Yes, Georgey is very fond of his grandfather.

GEORGE

Then he had better stay with you. Yesterday I deposited the twenty thousand pounds that my gold yielded. The interest will be about six hundred a year. You can draw a hundred of that for Georgey's education, leaving the rest to accumulate till he is of age. My friend here will be the trustee and if he will agree, I will also appoint him guardian to the boy, allowing him for the present to remain under your care. But he shall have the final say.

ROBERT

(Startled)

But why not take care of him yourself, George?

GEORGE

Because I shall sail in the next vessel that leaves Liverpool for Australia. I shall be better in the backwoods than I could ever be here.

MALDON

(Brightens)

My poor boy, I think you're right. The change, the wild life, the...the...

ROBERT

You seem in a great hurry to be rid of your son-in-law, I think, Mr. Maldon.

MALDON

Get rid of him! No, no! But for his own sake, my dear sir.

ROBERT

For his own sake he'd do better to remain in England and look after his son.

GEORGE

I tell you I cannot. Every inch of this accursed ground is hateful to me. I'll go back to town tonight, get the business about the money settled and start for Liverpool without delay. I shall be better when I've put half the world between my dear wife's grave and me.

ROBERT

You shan't go back to that dreadful place. I won't allow it. You're too dear a friend. We'll travel together. I have a standing invitation from dear friends in St. Petersburg. You'll get your respite. When we return you'll do as you should and care for your son.

*ROBERT AUDLEY's chambers at Figtree Court. A year later. September 1858
ROBERT sits at his desk, reading a letter from ALICIA AUDLEY. GEORGE lies on a sofa reading The Times. We see ALICIA.*

ALICIA

Welcome back, dear cousin. Lord only knows the mischief you created in your lazy year at St. Petersburg. One day you will finally be serious about life's serious work. I do look forward to seeing you, but you can't come. There are seventeen spare bedrooms here at Audley Court, but my father's wax-doll lady...she's no older than I am...says she is too ill to entertain visitors. Truthfully, there is no more the matter with her than there is with me. Please apologize to your friend Mr. Talboys and tell him that father expects to see you both in the hunting season.

ROBERT

(Reading)

Your loving cousin, Alicia

GEORGE

It seems to me we're not wanted by the lady of the estate.

ROBERT

Alicia is my dearest cousin though spoiled and often exercised. She ruled the court all the years of Sir Michael's widowhood, but the arrival of Lucy Graham set her back. They don't easily get along. You know what we'll do, George? There's a glorious inn at Audley, the Sun Inn, and first-rate fishing in the area. We'll go there and have a week's sport. I shall send a note to my uncle suggesting that when his new wife is feeling better we shall go and introduce you to Alicia. You'll soon become fond of her. The two of you are fully alike.

*Audley Court. Interior. A month later. October 1858. Lady Audley's chambers.
PHOEBE is brushing LADY AUDLEY's hair and is about to stop.*

LADY AUDLEY

Go on, dear Phoebe! Please! Do not stop!

PHOEBE

Yes, my lady.

LADY AUDLEY

Is it true that Sir Michael's nephew will be arriving tomorrow along with a friend who he wishes to introduce to Alicia?

PHOEBE

Yes, ma'am, I hear it is so.

LADY AUDLEY

Another boring evening! Why Sir Michael feels the need to let everyone in the world who wants to come to Audley Court do so is beyond me. We have so many other things to entertain us.

(Pause)

I want you to do me a favor.

PHOEBE

Of course, my lady.

LADY AUDLEY

Is no one around?

PHOEBE

We are alone, my lady.

LADY AUDLEY

I want you to go to London by the first train to dispose of a small matter for me. Take a day's holiday afterward, as I know you have friends in town. If you do this and keep your own counsel about it, you'll have a five-pound note for your efforts.

PHOEBE

You're very generous to me, my lady.

LADY AUDLEY

What I want you to do is very simple.
(Whispers in her ear)

(SIR MICHAEL ENTERS. LADY AUDLEY gaily kisses him.)

Oh, hello dear. I've just asked Phoebe to go to London in the morning to get the dress I ordered from Madam Frederick for the dinner at Morton Abbey. You do remember that dinner is a week from now, don't you, dear?

SIR MICHAEL

Yes, my dear. I am very much looking forward to it.

LADY AUDLEY

Well then, I shall see you when you return, Phoebe. My dear, I'll see you at breakfast.

Audley Court. Interior. The dining room. The next day. LADY AUDLEY AND SIR MICHAEL are having breakfast. SERVANT ENTERS with a sealed envelope and a receipt for HER to sign, which she does.

LADY AUDLEY

A telegraphic message, addressed to Miss Lucy Graham at Mr. Dawson's. My former employer sent it on to me. What can be the matter?

SIR MICHAEL

Read it, my darling. Do not be alarmed. It may be nothing of importance.

LADY AUDLEY

(Opens and reads)

It is from Mrs. Vincent, the schoolmistress for whom I worked before hiring on at the Dawsons. She is dangerously ill. She implores me to come and see her. Poor soul! She always meant to leave me her money. She hasn't heard of the change in my fortunes. I must go to her.

SIR MICHAEL

You must, dearest. If she was kind to my poor girl in her adversity, she has a claim upon my generosity. Pun on your bonnet, Lucy. We still have time to catch the noon express.

LADY AUDLEY

Darling, you will go with me?

SIR MICHAEL

Do you suppose I would let you go alone? Did your friend send an address?

LADY AUDLEY

No, but she always lived at Crescent Villas, West Brompton. No doubt she lives there still.

(THEY EXIT)

Audley Court. Interior. That evening. Shadows. ALICIA is giving ROBERT and GEORGE a tour of the mansion. THEY are passing through a tapestried chamber with large figures upon the faded canvas that look threatening in the dusky light. ALICIA carries the only candle.

ALICIA

I dare say Lady Audley was emphatic that we should not go into her rooms and pry about among her things while she's out. But the best picture in the house is in her antechamber. It's her unfinished portrait. No one else has seen it yet.

ROBERT

Her portrait! Not having met her, I am eager to see it.

ALICIA

Mr. Audley, my lady will be altogether displeased with me.

ROBERT

By my dear uncle, Miss Marks, I will take the responsibility. Have no fear.

(THEY ENTER Lady Audley's chambers. At that moment a clap of thunder is heard and we see lightening outside. A violent storm begins. Perfumes lay on the dressing table and flowers on a tiny writing table. Several dresses lay in a heap on the ground and an open closet reveals a rich wardrobe. Jewelry, ivory-backed hairbrushes and exquisite china are scattered around the room. ALICIA approaches an easel, which stands in a corner of the room, covered with a canvass. SHE moves it to the center and removes the canvass. We see the back of the painting, not the painting itself.)

PHOEBE

Behold, Lady Audley!

(THEY crowd together. With only the one candle THEY strain and congeal together to observe it. The storm outside grows louder.)

ROBERT

It's an extraordinary rendering.

(GEORGE recoils. Moves away, to the window, as if in fear)

GEORGE

My God! My God!

ROBERT

There's something odd about it. An extra quality of some sort.

ALICIA

There is, indeed! The painter resisted her childish coquettishness. He's captured a different quality. I have never seen my lady look as she does here, but I believe she could look so.

GEORGE

I do not believe it!

ROBERT

Fiendish, really. There's no other word for it.

GEORGE

She's as lovely a fiend as one could ever know!

ROBERT

George, what is wrong with you? Are you frightened of the lightening?

GEORGE

No! Not the lightening, no!

ROBERT

Dear boy, you are clearly frightened.

GEORGE

No, I am not!

ROBERT

But, George, I have never seen you look as you do now. It's as if you've seen a horrible ghost.

GEORGE

But I have!

ROBERT

Really! George, get ahold of yourself.

GEORGE

(Furious)

Robert Audley, if you say another word to me, I shall knock you down.

(HE EXITS abruptly, slamming the door. More thunder and lightening. ROBERT and ALICIA stare at each other.)

ALICIA

Do you think it was it was the painting?

ROBERT

He has never met the lady. To react in such an extreme way! No, it must be something else.

ALICIA

Sir, Lady Audley will return any moment now from her journey to West Brampton. She'll not be happy if she finds us in her private chambers. I will tidy up here. I trust you can let yourself out.

ROBERT

Of course. We shall return tomorrow night for dinner, that is if I can catch up with my friend and render him calm again. Good night, cousin. Thank you for our tour.

(ROBERT EXITS. ALICIA turns the portrait around as SHE tidies up the room. We see a fiendish beauty, a caricature. Her crimson dress is exaggerated and hangs about her in folds that look like flames. Her face peeps out of a lurid mass of color as if out of a raging furnace. Her lips are tainted with a ripe scarlet. She is beautiful, but repulsive at the same time. LADY AUDLEY ENTERS.)

LADY AUDLEY

What has been going on here? Who is it that I passed as he rushed to leave the mansion?

ALICIA

My lady, I gave Mr. Audley and his friend a tour of mansion.

LADY AUDLEY

They've seen the portrait? No one was to see the portrait till I said so!

ALICIA

They insisted, particularly Mr. Audley. He was most curious.

LADY AUDLEY

Leave me at once! We shall speak of this in the morning!

ALICIA

As you wish, my lady. Good night.

(SHE EXITS. LADY AUDLEY throws herself on the bed and weeps bitterly.)

Audley Court. Interior. The dining room. The next evening. SIR MICHAEL and ROBERT are standing, drinking brandy. The table is set for dinner.

ROBERT

It's the damndest thing, Sir Michael. He stormed out of the house and I haven't seen him since. He vanished! He never returned to the inn. Today I looked through all of Audley village. Not a trace. I inquired with your servants if he had perhaps returned and sure enough he had and inquired for Lady Audley. However, before they could announce him, it seems he went unaccompanied to the courtyard but stayed only briefly.

(LADY AUDLEY ENTERS, carrying hand-cut flowers from the garden. SHE's in a much better mood.)

SIR MICHAEL

How odd! What could be the matter?

LADY AUDLEY

What is the matter, Mr. Audley? Where is your friend Mr. Talboys? I have been looking forward to meeting the both of you.

ROBERT

Lady Audley, I am delighted to finally make your acquaintance. Forgive me if I say it's almost as if you've been avoiding us. Mr. Talboys returned here this afternoon it seems to see you, but once again, he vanished. On a hunch, I went to the railway station and, sure enough, the clerk confirmed that someone fitting George's description took the three o'clock train.

(THEY take their places at the table. SERVANT ENTERS with plates of pheasant.)

LADY AUDLEY

I was not made aware. Then, Mr. Talboys has returned to London. It appears he's left you in the lurch.

ROBERT

He's a good fellow. It's quite unlike him. To tell the honest truth, I'm rather uneasy.

LADY AUDLEY

Is he not the one who deserted his young wife and ran off to Australia?

ROBERT

Yes, but he was desperate then. He and I have just recently returned from spending a year in St. Petersburg together. We are close friends. To tell the truth, I am anxious for him.

LADY AUDLEY

Anxious? Good heavens, why?

ROBERT

I'll tell you why, Lady Audley. George had a bitter blow a year ago upon his return with the death of his wife. He takes life pretty quietly, almost as quietly as I do, but since that fateful day he learned of her death he often talks very strangely. I worry that one day his grief will get the better of him.

LADY AUDLEY

Dear me! I did not think men were capable of such deep affections. I thought that one pretty face was as good as another to them and that, when number one with blue eyes and fair hair died, they had only to look out for number two, with dark eyes and black hair, by way of variety.

ROBERT

George Talboys is not one of those men. I firmly believe that his wife's death broke his heart.

LADY AUDLEY

Then, it seems almost cruel of Mrs. Talboys to die and grieve her poor husband so much.

(SHE feigns an inability to carve the pheasant. SHE laughs.)

I could carve a leg of mutton at Mr. Dawson's but a leg of mutton is easy compared to this pheasant! Robert, would you be a good guest and assist me?

SIR MICHAEL

I am glad to see my poor little woman in her usual good spirits once more. She was very downhearted yesterday at a disappointment she met with in London.

ROBERT

(Rises and assists her in carving)

A disappointment?

LADY AUDLEY

Yes, Mr. Audley, a cruel one. I received in the morning a telegraphic message from Mrs. Vincent, my dear old friend and schoolmistress, telling me that she was dying and that, if I wanted to see her again, I must hasten to her immediately. But, the dispatch contained no address. I imagined therefore that she must be living in the same house which I had left three years ago. Sir Michael and I hurried into town and drove straight to the old address. The house was occupied by strange people who no idea of her whereabouts.

ROBERT

It was very foolish of her not to send the address in the telegraphic message.

LADY AUDLEY

When people are dying they often do not think clearly.

ROBERT

I feel like a man who has an only son whose life has gone terribly badly.

LADY AUDLEY

Upon my word, one might think that something extraordinary had happened to him.

SIR MICHAEL

I'm sure there is some simple explanation for his departure and you'll learn of it as soon as you return to London. He's probably sitting in your apartments at this very moment sipping your finest brandy.

ROBERT

(Reseating himself)

Lady Audley, as I carved your pheasant, I could not help but notice you incurred a bruise. Have you hurt your arm?

LADY AUDLEY

It is nothing. I am unfortunate in having skin that bruises at the slightest touch.

SIR MICHAEL

Good lord! What is it, Lucy? How did it happen?

LADY AUDLEY

How foolish you both are to trouble yourselves about something so absurd! I rather absentmindedly tied a strand of ribbon around my arm so tightly that it left a bruise when I removed it.

(SIR MICHAEL rises and goes to her to inspect)

SIR MICHAEL

There are several scratches, Lucy. We should have Dr. Dawson take a look.

LADY AUDLEY

Dear, we shall do nothing of the kind. It will heal nicely on its own.

ROBERT

My lady, I doubt Dr. Dawson would think your scratches were caused by a ribbon.

LADY AUDLEY

Mr. Audley, I have no doubt you will find your friend awaiting you at Figtree Court.

ROBERT

We shall see soon enough. I'll take the first train in the morning. If I don't find him there I shall go to Southampton and if I don't find him there...

LADY AUDLEY

What then?

ROBERT

I shall think that something extraordinary has happened to my dearest friend.

The Maldon cottage at Southampton. Interior. The next day. Dusk. The furniture is shabby and dingy. The place reeks of stale tobacco and brandy-and-water. A child's playthings lie about, broken. The carpet is dirty. A dwindling fire in the fireplace. LIEUTENANT MALDON paces. ROBERT is seated and lifts GEORGEY onto his lap.

ROBERT

I need scarcely ask the question that I come to ask. I was in hopes I should have found your son-in-law her.

MALDON

What! You knew he was coming?

ROBERT

Knew that he was coming? He is here, then?

MALDON

No, he is not here now, but he has been here.

ROBERT

When?

MALDON

Late last night. He came by the mail. He stayed little better than an hour.

ROBERT

Good heavens! What useless anxiety that man has given me! What can be the meaning of all this?

MALDON

You knew nothing of his intention, then?

ROBERT

Of what intention?

MALDON

His determination to go to Australia.

ROBERT

I knew it was always in his mind, more or less, but he's not mentioned it recently.

MALDON

He sails tonight from Liverpool. He came here at one o'clock this morning to have a look at the boy, he said, before he left England, perhaps never to return. He stayed an hour, kissed the boy without awaking him and left Southampton by the mail that starts at quarter-past-two.

ROBERT

It isn't like George Talboys.

GEORGEY

That's my name and my papa's name.

MALDON

Yes, little Georgey. Your papa came last night and kissed you in your sleep. Do you remember?

GEORGEY

No.

MALDON

You must have been very fast asleep, little Georgey, not to see poor papa.

GEORGEY

Where's the pretty lady?

ROBERT

What pretty lady?

GEORGEY

The pretty lady that used to come a long while ago.

MALDON

He means his poor mamma.

GEORGEY

No, not mamma. Mamma was always crying. I didn't like mamma.

MALDON

Hush, little Georgey!

GEORGEY

But I didn't and she didn't like me. She was always crying. I mean the pretty lady; the lady that was dressed so fine and that gave me my gold watch.

MALDON

He means the wife of my old captain, before I retired, an excellent creature, who took a great fancy to Georgey and gave him some handsome presents. I'm often hard pressed for a few shillings, Mr. Audley. Come, Georgey, it's time the brave little man was in bed. Come along with grandpa. Excuse me for a bit, Mr. Audley.

(At the bedroom door, HE turns back to Robert)

This is a poor place for me to pass my declining years in, Mr. Audley. I've made many sacrifices and I make them still, but I've not been treated well.

(MALDON and GEORGEY EXIT. ROBERT lights a cigar. HE notices a twisted piece of paper laying in front of the fireplace, half burned. It's what's left of a telegraphic message.)

ROBERT

(Reads)

'...alboys came to last night and left by the mail for London, on his way to Liverpool, whence was to sail for Sydney.'

(HE turns pale. HE carefully folds the scrap of paper and puts it in his pocket.)

My God, what is the meaning of this? I shall go to Liverpool tonight and make inquiries there.

(Shipping clerk's office, Liverpool. Interior. The next day. ROBERT is at the counter, conferring with the CLERK, who is looking over the list of passengers.)

CLERK

An emigrant ship sailed for Melbourne at four o'clock in the afternoon. The Victoria Regia, but I'm afraid there's no Talboys on the list, sir.

ROBERT

Did anyone, perhaps, arrive and enter their names within a short time of the vessel's sailing?

CLERK

Actually, yes. A young man came into the office at half-past three o'clock and paid his passage money. He's the last one on the list, Thomas Brown.

ROBERT

I doubt immensely that Mr. Talboys would have sailed under a feigned name, but do you remember what he looked like?

CLERK

No, it was very crowded. People were running in and out. I did notice one thing, however. I remember this Mr. Thomas Brown, his arm was in a sling.

(ROBERT drops his head in despair)

Audley Court. Exterior. A month later. October 1858. A blustery day. LADY AUDLEY and PHOEBE are walking on the grounds. LUKE, unseen, sits on the well as before, carving a hedge-stake.

LADY AUDLEY

This is a dull place, Phoebe, though I can't say it to my dear old husband. I don't know that I wasn't nearly as well off at Mr. Dawson's for its constant cheerfulness. But it's something to wear sables that cost sixty guineas and have a thousand pounds to spend on the decoration of one's apartments. And it feels most gratifying to give to those who struggle.

PHOEBE

My lady, your many good works have made you popular with farmers and villagers for miles around.

LADY AUDLEY

You won't leave me, Phoebe? Say you won't. Surely you are not in love with that unhappy creature Luke?

PHOEBE

We have been together from childhood and I promised, when I was little better than fifteen, that I'd be his wife. I daren't break that promise now. When he was a boy he was violent and revengeful. I saw him once take up his clasp knife in quarrel with his mother,

LADY AUDLEY

If you think violence is in him do you think you would be any safer as his wife?

PHOEBE

I must marry him. I have no choice. It would be my ruin and the ruin of others if I break my word. Please, my lady, don't try to thwart me in this!

LADY AUDLEY

Phoebe, I can't oppose you, but there must be some secret at the bottom of all this.

PHOEBE

(Looking away)

There is, my lady. Yours.

LADY AUDLEY

(Silence)

Oh! I see. Well, I shall be very sorry to lose you, but I have promised to always be your friend. What does Luke mean to do for a living?

PHOEBE

He would like to take a public house.

LADY AUDLEY

Then he shall take a public house and the sooner he drinks himself to death the better.

(LUKE suddenly steps out from his hiding place.)

Why, Mr. Marks, have you been spying on us?

LUKE

Just listenin,' my lady. Just listenin.'

LADY AUDLEY

Well then, since you have already heard, I'll come right to the point. You shall have fifty pounds to start your public house.

PHOEBE

You are very good, my lady.

(To LUKE)

Tell my lady how thankful you are, Luke.

LUKE

But I'm not so thankful. Fifty pound ain't much to start a public. You'll make it a hundred, my lady.

LADY AUDLEY

I shall do nothing of the kind and I'm shocked at your impertinence in asking it!

LUKE

I'm not askin.' For the shock, you'll make it a hundred and fifty.

LADY AUDLEY

(Silence)

Phoebe Marks, you have told this man everything! You have broken my trust in you!

PHOEBE

(Falling on her knees)

Oh, forgive me! Forgive me! He forced it from me or I would never, never have told!

LADY AUDLEY

Luke Marks, you could no more run a public house successfully than run a counting house, but you shall have your money. Then, be done with you! I'll not stand to be blackmailed repeatedly to compensate for your ineptness and greed by the likes of you!

Audley Court. Interior. The drawing room. December 1858. Christmas Lights decorate the room. ROBERT is seated in a corner chair, reading The Times and smoking. ALICIA ENTERS, wearing a riding habit.

ALICIA

You were always a poor spiritless fellow, Bob, but this year I don't know what has come over you. You are good for nothing but to hold a skein of silk or read Tennyson to Lady Audley.

ROBERT

My dear, impetuous Alicia, don't be violent. Lady Audley interests me and my uncle's country friends do not, nor do I care for riding around like a madman trying to chase down some wretched fox. Is that a sufficient answer?

ALICIA

It's as good an answer as I shall ever get from you, Bob. Lounge in an easy chair all day, soil my lady's window curtains with your cigars and annoy everybody in the house with your stupid, inanimate look. Robert Audley, with all your mock amiability you are the height of conceit! You look down upon our amusements. You lift up your eyebrows and shrug your shoulders and throw yourself back in your chair and wash your hands of us. You are selfish and coldhearted and incredibly lazy. Indeed, you are the laziest man I know. It's that simple.

ROBERT

Alicia! Good gracious, me?

ALICIA

Yes! You stoop down and pat the head of every good-for-nothing mutt in the village because you like good-for-nothing mutts. You notice little children and give them halfpence, because it amuses you to do so. You would let a man hit you and say 'thank you,' rather than take the trouble to hit him back. But you just roll your eyes when some poor baron tells a stupid story or suggests some energetic amusement.

(SHE storms out. EXITS. ROBERT looks puzzled, but settles back with his paper, relieved it's over. After a moment, LADY AUDLEY ENTERS, carrying a small easel and a watercolor sketchbook. SHE sets it down at the far end of the room and starts to paint. ROBERT studies her across the room.)

ROBERT

My cigar does not annoy you, Lady Audley?

LADY AUDLEY

Oh, no indeed. I am quite used to the small of tobacco. Mr. Dawson, the surgeon, smoked all the evening when I lived in his house.

ROBERT

Dawson is a good fellow, isn't he?

LADY AUDLEY

The dearest of creatures. He paid me five-and-twenty pounds a year. Five-and-twenty pounds! How glad I was to get it! Now, these colors I am using cost a guinea each at Winsor and Newton's. The carmine and ultramarine cost thirty shillings. I gave Mrs. Dawson one of my silk dresses the other day and the poor thing kissed me.

ROBERT

Some women would do a great deal to accomplish such a change as that.

(Silence. HE looks at his cigar)

My friend on Chancery Lane has not given me the best Manilla, I'm afraid. If you ever smoke, my dear aunt, and I am told that many women take a weed when no one's looking, be very careful how you choose your cigars.

LADY AUDLEY

What an eccentric person you are, Mr. Audley. You often puzzle me.

ROBERT

Not more than you puzzle me, dear aunt.

LADY AUDLEY

(Silence as she paints)

That Mr. George...George...

ROBERT

Talboys.

LADY AUDLEY

Yes, Mr. George Talboys, a rather singular name and certainly, by all accounts, a very singular person. Have you seen him lately?

(ROBERT rises and moves to a chair that's close to her)

ROBERT

I have not seen him since the 7th of September, the day upon which he stormed out of the mansion after viewing your portrait.

LADY AUDLEY

Dear me! What a strange young man this George Talboys must be! Tell me about him.

ROBERT

What's to tell? I've looked for him all over. After I last left Audley Court, I went to Southampton to visit Lieutenant Maldon, his father in law, and his boy Georgey. Maldon claimed he had visited on his way to Liverpool, saying he would sail to Australia. I went to Liverpool. There was no record of him on any ship that had sailed.

LADY AUDLEY

And what do you infer from all this?

ROBERT

It's a great mystery. I can grope my way only to two suppositions.

LADY AUDLEY

And they are?

ROBERT

First that George Talboys never went beyond Southampton. Second that he never went to Southampton at all.

LADY AUDLEY

But you traced him there. His father-in-law had seen him.

ROBERT

I have reason to doubt his father-in-law's integrity.

LADY AUDLEY

Good gracious! What do you mean by all this?

ROBERT

Lady Audley, did you ever study the theory of circumstantial evidence?

LADY AUDLEY

(Puts her brush down and turns to him)

How can you ask a poor little woman about such things! What is it?

ROBERT

A fabric of little things. A scrap of paper, a shred of some torn garment, the button off a coat, a word dropped by the overcautious, the fragment of a letter, the shutting or opening of a door. A thousand circumstances so slight as to be forgotten by the criminal, but links of iron in the chain woven by the relentless detective. At the chain's end, lo, the gallows! The solemn bell tolls through the dismal gray morning, the drop creaks loudly and suddenly under the guilty feet. The penalty of the crime is paid.

(Silence. LADY AUDLEY sits motionless. Then, SHE rises and moves to the door, leaving her painting and easel behind. Before SHE reaches it...)

Lady Audley!

(SHE stops, but does not turn around.)

George Talboys never reached Southampton.

(SHE EXITS, slamming the door. ROBERT resumes smoking and reading The Times. ALICIA ENTERS, in tears and slams the door behind her. ROBERT looks up, less than pleased with this latest interruption.)

ROBERT

Alicia! You're back! So soon?

(SHE is silent and sits in a chair at the far end of the room.)

You've been crying. Sir Harry Towers, of Towers Park, has made you an offer of his hand. Is that it?

ALICIA

You've been listening at the door.

ROBERT

I have not. I deduced it.

ALICIA

How did you do that?

ROBERT

I watched him. He has been paying the utmost attention to you. Moreover, he came downstairs with his hair parted on the wrong side and his face as pale as a tablecloth. Secondly, he couldn't eat any breakfast and let his coffee go the wrong way. Thirdly he asked for an interview with you before he left the Court. Well, what's it to be? Do we marry the baronet? Will your poor cousin Bob be the best man at the wedding.

ALICIA

Sir Harry Towers is a noble-hearted young man.

ROBERT

But, do we accept him, yes or no?

ALICIA

What is it to you, Robert Audley? What do you care what becomes of me or whom I marry? If I married a chimney sweep you'd only lift up your eyebrows and say, 'Bless my soul, she was always eccentric.' I have refused Sir Harry Towers, but when I think of his generous and unselfish affection and compare it with the heartless, lazy, selfish, supercilious indifference of other men, particularly the coy, constant indifference of my cousin, I've a good mind to run after him and tell him...

ROBERT

That you'll retract and be his Lady Towers?

ALICIA

Yes.

(ROBERT moves across the room and sits next to her)

ROBERT

My poor Alicia, life is such a troublesome matter. When all is said and done, it's just as well to take its blessings quietly.

ALICIA

Is this all you have to say to me, Robert?

ROBERT

Well, yes, I think so. I fancy that what I wanted to say was this, don't marry the fox-hunting baronet if you like anybody else better, for, if you'll only be patient and take life easily, and try and refrain from banging doors, bouncing in and out of rooms, talking constantly of the stables and riding hither and yon' across the country, I've no doubt the person you prefer will make you a very excellent husband.

(ALICIA stands up, having gathered herself)

ALICIA

Well, thank you, cousin, but as you may not know the person I prefer, I think you had better not take upon yourself to answer for him.

ROBERT

No, to be sure, of course, if I don't know him. I thought I did.

ALICIA

For all your smug self-assurance, Robert, you are clueless about life and love.

(SHE EXITS slamming the door more forcefully than she had upon entering.)

ROBERT

(Sheepishly calling after her)

I only said I thought I knew him. Such a nice girl, if she didn't bounce.

Audley Court. Exterior. The same day. Despite the cold, SIR MICHAEL is feeding the fish in the pond. LADY AUDLEY ENTERS and hugs him from behind.

LADY AUDLEY

So the last of our visitors is gone, dear, and we're all alone. Isn't that nice?

SIR MICHAEL

Yes, darling.

LADY AUDLEY

Except Mr. Robert Audley. How long is that nephew of yours going to stay here?

SIR MICHAEL

As long as he likes. He's always welcome. But not unless his visit is agreeable to you, darling. Not if his lazy habits or his smoking or anything about him is displeasing to you.

LADY AUDLEY

It isn't that. Mr. Audley is a very agreeable young man and a very honorable young man, but you know, Sir Michael, I'm rather a young aunt for such a nephew and...

SIR MICHAEL

And what, Lucy?

LADY AUDLEY

Poor Alicia is rather jealous of any attention Mr. Audley pays me and, and, I think it would be better for her happiness if your nephew were to bring his visit to a close.

SIR MICHAEL

He shall go tonight, Lucy. I am a blind, neglectful fool not to have thought of this before. It was most unjust to Bob to expose the poor lad to your fascinations.

LADY AUDLEY

But you won't be too abrupt, dear? You won't be rude?

SIR MICHAEL

Rude! No, Lucy. I'll simply go and tell him that he must get out of this house in an hour.

Audley Court. Interior. Moments later. The drawing room. ROBERT has settled once again in his favorite chair, reading The Times and smoking. SIR MICHAEL ENTERS abruptly and quietly closes the door behind him. ROBERT looks up at this latest intrusion.

ROBERT

Dear uncle, is something the matter?

SIR MICHAEL

No. Well, yes, I suppose. I think it's time for you to go.

ROBERT

(Surprised but unruffled)

Then, I'll depart at once. But if I may ask why you think so?

SIR MICHAEL

Robert, you are like a son to me, the son I never had. But this is no place for an eight and twenty year old bachelor without a duty in the world. My lady is too young and pretty to accept the attentions of a handsome nephew like you.

ROBERT

I have been attentive to my lady, but God forbid, my dear uncle, that I should ever bring trouble upon such a noble heart as yours. God forbid that the slightest shadow of dishonor should ever fall upon you, least of all through my agency.

The bar-parlor of the Castle Inn. Interior. Later that evening. It's a small and dingy hotel displaying pitiful woodwork, rickety ceilings and drafty windows. ROBERT ENTERS and places his bags down and proceeds to the bar. It's snowing and HE shakes off the snow from his coat. The wind will howl periodically. LUKE tends bar and PHOEBE sits at a nearby table darning a pair of her husband's socks. THEY both look up in surprise at his arrival. PHOEBE moves to the far end of the room and whispers to a BOY, writing a note and dispatching him with it.

PHOEBE

You have come straight from Audley Court, sir?

ROBERT

Yes, I only left my uncle's an hour ago.

PHOEBE

And my lady, sir, was she quite well?

ROBERT

Yes, quite well.

PHOEBE

As gay and light-hearted as ever, sir?

ROBERT

Indeed. Not a care in the world.

(To LUKE)

Brandy and water, if you please.

(To PHOEBE)

You knew Lady Audley when she was Miss Lucy Graham, did you not?

(LUKE serves and settles down on his stool behind the bar)

PHOEBE

Yes, sir. I lived at Mrs. Dawson's when my lady was governess there.

ROBERT

Indeed. Was she long in the surgeon's family?

PHOEBE

About a year, sir.

ROBERT

And she came from London?

PHOEBE

Yes, sir.

ROBERT

She was an orphan, I'm told.

PHOEBE

Yes, sir.

ROBERT

Always as cheerful as she is now?

PHOEBE

Always, sir.

ROBERT

Would you object to a cigar, Mrs. Marks? I mean my smoking one.

PHOEBE

Not at all, sir.

LUKE

It would be a good 'un her objectin' to a bit of 'bacca when me and the customers smokes all day.

ROBERT

(Lighting his cigar)

I want you to tell me all about Mount Stanning, Mr. Marks.

LUKE

The town? That's pretty soon told. Of all the dull holes as ever a man set foot in, this is about the dullest. Not that Castle Inn don't pay pretty tidy. I don't complain of that, but I should ha' liked a public at Chelmsford or Brentwood or Romford or some place where there's a bit of life in the streets. And I might have had it if folks hadn't been so stingy.

PHOEBE

(Looks at LUKE with concern)

We forgot the brew-house door, Luke. Will you come and help me put up the bar?

LUKE

The brew-house door can bide for tonight. I ain't agoin' to move now. I've seated myself for a comfortable smoke.

(HE deliberately fills his long clay pipe)

PHOEBE

But, I don't feel easy about that door, Luke. There are always tramps about and they can easily get in when the bar isn't up.

LUKE

Go and put the bar up yourself, then, can't you?

PHOEBE

It's too heavy for me to lift.

LUKE

Then let it bide, if you're too fine a lady to see to it yourself. You're very anxious all of a sudden about the brew-house door. I know you don't want me to open my mouth to this here gent. Oh, you needn't frown at me to stop my speaking! You're always putting in your tongue and clipping off my words before I've half said 'em, but I won't stand it. Do you hear? I won't stand it.

(PHOEBE stops darning. Sits with eyes fixed on LUKE)

ROBERT

Then you don't particularly care to live in Mount Stanning?

LUKE

No, I don't and I don't care who knows it, and, as I said before, if folks hadn't been so stingy, I might have had a public in a thrivin' market town, instead of this tumble-down old place where a man has his hair blowed off his head on a windy day. What's fifty pound or a hundred pound more?

PHOEBE

Luke! Luke!

LUKE

No, you're not goin' to stop my mouth with all your 'Lukes,' 'Lukes.' I say again, what's a hundred pound more?

ROBERT

(To Luke, though looking at Phoebe)

What indeed is a hundred pounds to a man possessed of the power which you hold, or rather which your wife holds, over the person in question?

(LADY AUDLEY ENTERS with BOY, who runs and sits at the table where he sat earlier. SHE wears a fashionable fur coat.)

Well, Lady Audley! What a surprise! We had just said our goodbyes! And in the snow!

LADY AUDLEY

Yes, indeed! What a day it has turned into, Mr. Audley. What a day!

ROBERT

And pray tell why did you come out in such weather.

(LADY AUDLEY stares harshly at LUKE, then at Phoebe)

LUKE

(To PHOEBE)

I thinks it time we closed that brew-house door proper. With this here snow those tramps will come lookin' for a place to go.

(THEY hastily put on their coats and EXIT)

LADY AUDLEY

Because I wished to see you, particularly.

ROBERT

You did? Why on earth?

LADY AUDLEY

(Removing her gloves)

Indeed, Mr. Audley, I felt that you had not been well treated, that, that you had reason to complain and that an apology was due to you.

ROBERT

I do not wish for any apology, Lady Audley.

LADY AUDLEY

But you are entitled to one. Why, my dear Robert, should we be so ceremonious toward each other? You were comfortable at Audley. We were glad to have you there, but my dear silly husband took it into his foolish head that it is dangerous for his poor little wife's peace of mind to have a nephew of eight and twenty smoking his cigars in her boudoir. Suddenly, our pleasant little family circle was broken up.

ROBERT

Lady Audley, heaven forbid that either you or I should ever bring grief or dishonor upon my uncle's generous heart! Better, perhaps, that I should be out of the house, even better perhaps if I had never entered it.

(Silence. SHE stares at HIM with a questioning gaze)

Lady Audley, do not be alarmed. You have no silly infatuation to fear from me.

LADY AUDLEY

If you insist on talking in enigmas, Mr. Audley, you must forgive a poor little woman if she declines to answer them.

(Silence again as THEY stare)

But tell me, what could have induced you to come up to this dismal place?

ROBERT

Curiosity.

LADY AUDLEY

Curiosity?

ROBERT

Yes, I felt an interest in the proprietor of Castle Inn. I think he's a dangerous man, my lady, a man in whose power I should not like to be.

LADY AUDLEY

(Visibly nervous. Cries out)

What have I done to you, Robert Audley, that you should hate me so?

ROBERT

I lost a friend, Lady Audley, whom I loved dearly since we were at Eton together as lads.

LADY AUDLEY

You mean the Mr. Talboys who went to Australia?

ROBERT

Mr. Talboys who I was told set out for Liverpool with the intent of going to Australia.

LADY AUDLEY

You do not believe he sailed for Australia?

ROBERT

Nor Southampton, to visit his son and father in law.

LADY AUDLEY

But why not?

ROBERT

Forgive me, Lady Audley, if I decline to answer that question.

LADY AUDLEY

(Shrugs)

As you please.

ROBERT

A week after my friend disappeared I posted an advertisement to the Sydney and Melbourne papers, calling upon him if he was in either city to write and tell me of his whereabouts, and calling on anyone who had met him to give me any information about him. George Talboys disappeared from Essex, on the 6th of September last. I ought to receive an answer by the end of this month. Today is the 27th of December. The time draws near.

LADY AUDLEY

And if you receive no answer?

ROBERT

Then I shall think my fears have not been unfounded and I shall do my best to act.

LADY AUDLEY

Pray tell, what do you mean by that?

ROBERT

Lady Audley, you remind me how powerless I am. Foul deeds have been done under the most hospitable roofs. Terrible crimes have been committed amid the tranquil scenes and left no trace. I believe we may look into the smiling face of a murderer and admire her radiant beauty.

(SHE laughs fiendishly. For a brief moment we are reminded of the portrait)

LADY AUDLEY

You seem to have quite a taste for discussing horrible subjects. You ought to have been a detective police officer.

ROBERT

I do think I would have been a good one.

LADY AUDLEY

Why?

ROBERT

Because I am patient.

LADY AUDLEY

What if you receive no answer to your advertisements?

ROBERT

I shall consider myself justified in concluding my friend is dead.

LADY AUDLEY

Yes and then?

ROBERT

I shall examine the personal effects he left at my chambers at Figtree Court.

LADY AUDLEY

And what are they? Coats, waistcoats, varnished boots and meerschaum pipes, I suppose.

ROBERT

No, letters, letters from his friends, his old schoolfellows, his father, his brother officers.

LADY AUDLEY

Yes?

ROBERT

And from his wife.

(Silence. SHE stares out at the storm. The wind howls)

LADY AUDLEY

Have you ever seen any of the letters written by the late Mrs. Talboys?

ROBERT

Never. Poor Soul! Her letters are not likely to throw much light upon my friend's fate. I dare say she wrote the usual womanly scrawl.

(Beat)

There are, of course, very few who write so charming and uncommon a hand as yours, Lady Audley.

LADY AUDLEY

You know my hand?

ROBERT

I know it very well.

LADY AUDLEY

(Putting her gloves back on)

You have refused to accept my apology, Mr. Audley, but I trust you are not the less assured of my feelings toward you.

ROBERT

Perfectly assured, Lady Audley.

LADY AUDLEY

Then, goodbye and let me recommend you not stay long in this miserable, draughty place, if you do not wish to take rheumatism back to Figtree Court.

ROBERT

I shall return to town tomorrow morning to see after my letters.

LADY AUDLEY

Then, once more goodbye.

(SHE holds out her gloved hand. HE takes it loosely and bows. SHE EXITS. ROBERT resumes smoking and attends to his brandy and water. After a moment, he notices the BOY.)

ROBERT

Do you know her?

BOY

On' in passing, sir.

ROBERT

What do you think of her, boy? Do you like her?

BOY

She's nic' enou.' She's kind to servants and visits the poo' unfortunates in the vill.' She talks nice to 'em. Gives out a few quid now an' 'en. I 'ave notin' bad to say, sir.

ROBERT

That's all good, I suppose.

BOY

And she's very pretty, sir.

ROBERT

(Rises. Takes a final swig)

So's the devil, boy. So's the devil.

(Tosses a shilling to HIM. EXITS)

You keep yourself out of trouble, you hear. It's easy to find around here.

BOY

Tank' you, sire!

Figtree Court. Interior. Late that night. The door to Robert's chambers, which are dark, swings open, having been pried open by LOCKSMITH. A LADY dressed in a black robe and hood, who's face and features we cannot see, sweeps in and goes directly to a portmanteau on the floor and opens it. SHE ruffles through its contents until SHE finds what she's looking for, a packet of letters bound together by a faded ribbon. SHE carefully restores the portmanteau as she found it, and EXITS swiftly out the door. LOCKSMITH closes the door behind them and EXITS.

Figtree Court. Interior. The next afternoon. ROBERT is in his chambers ruffling through the same portmanteau, laying each item out one by one. Finally, he sits back and sighs heavily.

ROBERT

Helen's letters which I saw George Talboys sorting several times with a reverent hand. They're gone. Someone has been here since George and I were last together in these chambers this past September. Was it George? No, most certainly not. Was it my lady? How? George Talboys, am I ever to come any nearer to the secret of your fate? Am I coming nearer to it now, slowly but surely? How is it all to end?

(He removes a little heap of old, tattered books and begins to sift through them. Suddenly, from one book, out drops a curly yellow lock of an infant's hair. It resembles that which we had seen with Lucy Graham and is quite different from the one the Woman at Ventnor Cemetery had given George. He lays it aside. In another book he finds an 1853 inscription in which Helen Maldon gave the book to George Talboys.)

(Reading)

'Dear George, this book has been handed down through several generations of Maldons. I give it to you with love, your devoted Helen.' God knows I was prepared for the worst and the worst has come. The book never occurred to her, only the letters. Helen Maldon's inscription to George Talboys is unmistakably in the same hand as that of Lady Audley. I understand it all now, but I must prove it. My uncle will be devastated.

Grange Heath, the estate of HARCOURT TALBOYS. Interior. January 1859. Austere. Imposing. A large dining room furnished with severe simplicity and an ample table. HARCOURT, dressed in a severe-looking grey cloth dressing gown, sits at the top of the table. CLARA TALBOYS, his daughter, sits at the far end of the room, near a window, away from the table, working with needlework. SHE has a wicker basket next to her filled with calicoes and flannels. ROBERT ENTERS ushered in by a SERVANT. CLARA, half rises, letting her work fall from her lap and dropping a reel of cotton, which rolls away from her.

HARCOURT

(Without looking at her)

Sit down, Clara! Sit down and keep your cotton in your workbox.

(ROBERT, kneels on the floor, finds the reel, and walks over to hand it to CLARA. HARCOURT stares at him in complete disbelief.)

Mr. Audley, perhaps when you have finished looking for reels of cotton, you will be good enough to tell me to what I owe the honor of this visit. All of Dorsetshire knows not to disturb me at my breakfast hour.

ROBERT

I do not hail from Dorsetshire, Mr. Talboys.

(SERVANT seats ROBERT in one of the ponderous chairs.)

HARCOURT

(To Servant)

Perhaps Mr. Audley would like coffee.

ROBERT

Thank you, but no.

HARCOURT

(To Servant)

Mr. Audley will not take coffee, Wilson. You may go.

(SERVANT bows and EXITS. Silence. Finally,)

ROBERT

I wrote to you some time ago, Mr. Talboys.

HARCOURT

I received your communication. It was duly answered.

ROBERT

That letter concerned your son.

(CLARA sits motionless, having stopped her knitting)

HARCOURT

Your letter concerned the person who was once my son. I must ask you to remember that I no longer have a son.

ROBERT

You don't have to remind me of that, Mr. Talboys, but now I have reason to believe that you no longer have a son. I have cause to think that he is dead.

HARCOURT

No, no, I assure you, no.

ROBERT

I believe George Talboys died in the month of September.

HARCOURT

No, no, I assure you. You labor under a sad mistake.

ROBERT

You believe that I am mistaken? Do you know something perhaps that I do not?

HARCOURT

I understand this matter better than you, Mr. Audley. Permit me to assure you of three things. In the first place, your friend is not dead. In the second place, he is keeping out of the way for the purpose of alarming me, of trifling with my feelings as a, as a man who was once his father, and of ultimately obtaining my forgiveness. In the third place, he will not obtain that forgiveness, however long he may please to keep out of the way and he would therefore act wisely by returning to his ordinary residence and avocations without delay.

ROBERT

You imagine him to have purposely hidden himself from all who know him...

HARCOURT

For the purpose of influencing me. He knew the inflexibility of my character. He knew that all attempts to soften my decision had failed. He therefore tried extraordinary means.

ROBERT

I have a great deal to say to you upon this sad subject, Mr. Talboys, but I would rather say it to you alone.

HARCOURT

My daughter knows my ideas upon this subject, Mr. Audley. There is no reason why she should not hear all you have to say. Miss Clara Talboys. Mr. Robert Audley.

ROBERT

Your son was my very dear friend. Perhaps most of all dear because I had known him and been with him through the great troubles in his life. He stood alone in the world, cast off by you who should have loved him and was bereft of the only woman he had ever loved.

HARCOURT

The daughter of a drunken pauper.

ROBERT

I believe, only too firmly, that my poor friend has been murdered.

HARCOURT and CLARA

Murdered!

HARCOURT

Mr. Audley, you are mad! You are mad or else you are commissioned by your friend to play upon my feelings. I protest against this proceeding as a conspiracy.

ROBERT

It is far from my wish to alarm you unnecessarily, sir. I come to you for advice.

(Removes paper from his pocket and hands it to HARCOURT)

Here is a list of all the occurrences which have aroused my suspicions. Please review them. If you think my suspicions are foolish and unfounded, I am ready to submit to your better judgment. I will abandon my search for the evidence to confirm my fears, which to this point has been a solitary venture. On the other hand, if you say go on, I will go on.

(HARCOURT takes the paper and begins reading. Silence as he does so. CLARA stands, moves to the table near her father)

HARCOURT

This in no way turns me from my previous opinion. I think my son is alive and that his disappearance is a conspiracy against me. I decline to become its victim.

ROBERT

Then, you tell me to stop?

HARCOURT

I tell you only this. If you go on, you go on for your own satisfaction, not mine. I see nothing in what you have stated here to alarm me for the safety of ...your friend.

ROBERT

So be it, then. From this moment I wash my hands of this business.

(HE Rises. Looks at CLARA.)

Good morning, Mr. Talboys. God grant that you are right, but I fear the day will come when you will come to regret your apathy respecting the untimely fate of your only son.

(HE bows gravely to HARCOURT and CLARA. Looks again for a long moment at CLARA. EXITS.)

Grange Heath. Exterior. The garden. Moments later. Straight-limbed snow covered fir trees with a smooth, quadrangle lawn. ROBERT is making his way from the mansion. CLARA ENTERS, running behind him.

CLARA

Mr. Audley! Mr. Audley!

ROBERT

Miss Talboys! What can I...why...?

CLARA

I read it all. I believe what you believe and I shall go mad unless I can do something, something toward avenging his death.

ROBERT

Take my arm, Miss Talboys. Pray calm yourself. Let us walk a little way and talk quietly. I would not have spoken as I did had I known...

CLARA

How should you know that I loved my brother? How should anyone think that I loved him, when I have never had power to give him a welcome or a kind word? I know my father, Mr. Audley. I knew that to intercede for George would have been to ruin his cause. I waited patiently, always hoping, for I knew that my father loved his only son. It is difficult for a stranger to believe that underneath his stoicism, my father conceals affection for his children, for he has always ruled his life by the strict code of duty.

ROBERT

Pray, calm yourself, Miss Talboys. I may be mistaken in my opinion.

CLARA

No, no, no, you are not mistaken. My brother has been murdered. Tell me the name of the woman you suspect of being responsible for his disappearance and murder.

ROBERT

That I cannot do until...

CLARA

Until when?

ROBERT

Until I can prove that the suspected person is guilty.

CLARA

You told my father that you would abandon all idea of discovering the truth, but you will not do so, Mr. Audley. You will not be false to the memory of your friend. You will see vengeance done upon whoever has destroyed him. You will do this, will you not?

ROBERT

It appears a hand stronger than my own is beckoning me onward. If you knew what misery to me may be involved in discovering the truth, Miss Talboys, you would scarcely ask me to pursue this business any further.

CLARA

But I do ask you. I ask you to avenge my brother's death. Will you do so? Yes or no?

ROBERT

What if I answer no?

CLARA

Then I will do it myself. I myself will follow up the clues to this mystery. I will find this person, though you refuse to tell me in what part of England my brother disappeared. I will travel from one end of the world to the other to find the secret of his fate. Choose, Mr. Audley. Shall you find my brother's murder or shall I?

(Silence. HE does not answer)

I have grown up in an atmosphere of suppression. I have stifled the natural feelings of my heart until they have become unnatural in their intensity. I have been allowed neither friends nor lovers. My mother died when I was very young. My father has always been to me what you saw him today. I have had no one but my brother. All the love that my heart can hold has been centered on him. Do you wonder, then, why I must see vengeance done?

ROBERT

(Visibly moved)

Miss Talboys, your brother shall not be unavenged. He shall not be forgotten. But you must be patient and trust me.

CLARA

I will trust you, for I see that you will help me.

ROBERT

Have you any letters of your brother's, Miss Talboys?

CLARA

Two. One written soon after his marriage, the other written at Liverpool, the night before he sailed for Australia.

ROBERT

Will you let me see them?

CLARA

Yes, I will send them to you. You will write to me from time to time, will you not, to tell me how you are faring? I must act secretly here, but I am going to leave home in two or three months and I shall be perfectly free then to act as I please.

ROBERT

You are not going to leave England?

CLARA

No. I am going to pay a long promised visit to some friends in Essex.

(ROBERT is visibly startled. SHE sees this.)

My brother George disappeared in Essex.

ROBERT

I am sorry you have discovered so much. It is all very complicated and still uncertain. Hope even against hope. We may both be deceived. Your brother may still live.

CLARA

If it could be so! Goodbye for now. Your card please, so that I may send you his letters.

(ROBERT hands her his card. Takes her hand. Looks at her tenderly. We see ALICIA, who reads a letter she's written.)

ALICIA

Papa is ill, not dangerously ill, thank God, but confined to his room by a low fever. Come and see him, Robert. I know he will be glad to have you with him. Come at once, but say nothing about this letter. Your affectionate cousin, Alicia.

Audley Court. Interior. A few weeks later. February 1859. SIR MICHAEL'S luxurious bedchamber. HE sleeps, his hand clasped in LADY AUDLEY'S hand. ALICIA sits in a chair near the fireplace. ROBERT ENTERS.

LADY AUDLEY

Mr. Audley!

ALICIA

Hush! You'll wake papa. How good of you to come, Robert.

(SHE beckons him to take an empty chair near the bed. HE seats himself, stares at LADY AUDLEY.)

ROBERT

He has not been very ill, has he?

LADY AUDLEY

Oh, no, not dangerously ill.

(Silence. We hear SIR MICHAEL'S labored breathing.)

ROBERT

I have no doubt you have been anxious, Lady Audley. There is no one to whom my uncle's life can be of more value than to you. Your happiness, your prosperity, your safety, all depend upon his existence.

LADY AUDLEY

(Turning to him)

I know that full well. Those who strike me must strike through him.

SIR MICHAEL

(Stirring)

Robert?

ROBERT

Sir Michael!

SIR MICHAEL

I've been thinking of you. You may be the cause of my illness. You and Lucy must become good friends. Bob, you must learn to think of her as your aunt, though she is young and beautiful and...you understand, eh?

ROBERT

(Takes his uncle's hand)

I do and I give you my word of honor that I am steeled against my lady's fascinations.

LADY AUDLEY

Silly Robert! You take everything *au serieux*. If I thought you were rather too young for a nephew, it was only in my fear of other people's foolish gossip, not from any...

(The sudden entrance of DR. DAWSON interrupts her. HE takes the patient's pulse, consults his chart.)

DR. DAWSON

Sir Michael is somewhat better. Please keep him rested and prohibit any visitors. He will recover. I shall return tomorrow to check on him again.

ROBERT

(Taking a candle)

I will light you to the staircase.

DR. DAWSON

No, no, Mr. Audley. Do not trouble yourself. I know my way very well indeed.

ROBERT

I wish to have a word with you, Dr. Dawson.

(THEY move outside the bedchamber.)

DR. DAWSON

If you are at all alarmed about your uncle, Mr. Audley, I can set your mind at rest. There is no occasion for the least uneasiness.

ROBERT

I am sure of that, but I am not going to speak of my uncle. I wish to ask you two or three questions about another person.

DR. DAWSON

Indeed.

ROBERT

The person who lived with your family as Miss Lucy Graham, who is now Lady Audley.

DR. DAWSON

Pardon me, Mr. Audley, you can scarcely expect me to answer questions about your uncle's wife without Sir Michael's express permission. What is your motive can to ask such questions? I always respected the lady as Miss Graham, sir, and I esteem her even more now. She is the wife of one of the noblest men in Christendom.

ROBERT

You cannot respect my uncle or my uncle's honor more sincerely than I do. I have no unworthy motive for my questions. You must answer them.

DR. DAWSON

Must?

ROBERT

Yes, you are my uncle's friend. It was at your house he met the woman who is now his wife. She called herself an orphan and enlisted his pity as well as his admiration. She told him that she stood alone in the world, did she not, without a friend or relative? This was all I could ever learn of her antecedents.

DR. DAWSON

What reason have you to wish to know more?

ROBERT

A terrible reason. For some months past I have struggled with doubts and suspicions. I do not think that the woman who bears my uncle's name is worthy to be his wife. I wish to set my doubts at rest or confirm my fears. There is but one manner in which I can do this. I must trace the life of my uncle's wife backward from this night to a period of six years ago. This is the twenty fourth of February fifty-nine. I want to know every record of her life between tonight and the February of the year fifty-three.

DR. DAWSON

And your motive is a worthy one?

ROBERT

Yes, I wish to clear her from a dreadful suspicion.

DR. DAWSON

Which exists only in your mind?

ROBERT

And in the mind of one other person.

DR. DAWSON

May I ask who that person is?

ROBERT

No, Mr. Dawson. I cannot reveal anything more than what I have already told you. I am a irresolute, vacillating man in most things. In this matter I am compelled to be decided.

DR. DAWSON

You have astonished and alarmed me, Mr. Audley. I have always considered your uncle's wife one of the most amiable of women. She was married to your uncle last June. She had lived in my house a little more than thirteen months. She became a member of my household upon the fourteenth of May in the year fifty-six.

ROBERT

And she came to you...?

DR. DAWSON

From a school in Brompton, a school kept by a lady in the name of Vincent. It was Mrs. Vincent's strong recommendation that induced me to receive Miss Graham into my family without knowledge of her antecedents. I wrote to her inquiring about Miss Graham. Her reply was perfectly satisfactory and complementary. I accepted this reference and I never had cause to regret it.

ROBERT

Will you be so kind as to give me her address?

DR. DAWSON

Certainly. She was then living at No. 9 Crescent Villas, Brompton.

ROBERT

Crescent Villas, yes. This Mrs. Vincent telegraphed to my uncle's wife early in last September. She was ill, dying, I believe, and sent for my lady, but had moved from her old house and was not to be found.

DR. DAWSON

I never heard Lady Audley mention the circumstance.

ROBERT

Perhaps not. Thank you Mr. Dawson. You have taken me back two and a half years, but there is still a blank of three years to fill up before I can exonerate her. Good evening.

(ROBERT returns to the bedroom and sits at a table near ALICIA. SHE pretends to be absorbed in the book she's reading but displays an underlying animation.)

LADY AUDLEY

You'll take a cup of tea with us, Mr. Audley?

ROBERT

If you please, Alicia, my dear, you're not looking well.

ALICIA

(Shrugs, but continues to eye the book)

What does it matter? I'm becoming like you. Who cares whether I am well or ill?

ROBERT

You needn't light into a fellow because he asks you a civil question, Alicia. As to nobody caring about your health, that's nonsense. I care. Sir Harry Towers cares. Is the book interesting?

ALICIA

Not particularly.

ROBERT

Then I think you might display better manners than read it while your first cousin is sitting opposite you, especially as he will be off tomorrow morning?

LADY AUDLEY

Tomorrow morning?

ROBERT

Yes, I shall be obliged to run up to London tomorrow but I shall return the next day, if you will allow me, Lady Audley, and stay till my uncle recovers.

LADY AUDLEY

But you are not seriously alarmed about him, are you?

ROBERT

No, I think there is not the slightest cause for apprehension.

LADY AUDLEY

Were you talking of Sir Michael with Dr. Dawson?

ROBERT

No, my lady.

LADY AUDLEY

What could you say to Mr. Dawson or he to you? You are almost strangers to each other.

ROBERT

Suppose Mr. Dawson wished to consult me about some law business?

LADY AUDLEY

Was it that?

ROBERT

It would be rather unprofessional to tell you if it were so, my lady.

ALICIA

Upon my word, Robert Audley, you are not a very agreeable companion with dithering and comings and goings. You hardly answer the simplest questions. You have little to say that is of any interest. Perhaps the next time you come to the Court you will be good enough to bring your mind with you. Lately, it has constantly seemed elsewhere.

Mrs. Vincent's London schoolhouse. Interior. A few days later, February 1859A small and comfortless parlor with several rickety cane chairs, a Pembroke table, a Dutch clock, a plain, slim-legged card table, threadbare carpet with wire baskets of cactus plants growing downward. Several books and the sound of a piano and the sound of half a dozen children's voices from a nearby room. ROBERT is seated, rather uncomfortably. MRS. VINCENT and MISS TONKS ENTER. MISS TONKS carries a dilapidated, paper-covered bonnet box.

MRS. VINCENT

Mr. Audley, I presume? This is Miss Tonks, one of my teachers. She has a far better memory than I. Miss Tonks, Mr. Audley is a relative of Lucy Graham and has come to make certain inquiries concerning her time with us.

ROBERT

I apologize for intruding on you, but my motive for calling is a serious one. You remember the lady whose name I wrote upon my card?

MRS. VINCENT

Perfectly.

ROBERT

May I ask how much you know of that lady's history since her departure from your house?

MRS. VINCENT

Very little. Miss Graham, I believe, obtained a situation in Essex with a surgeon's family. Indeed, it was I who recommended her. I have never heard from her since she left me.

ROBERT

But you have communicated with her?

MRS. VINCENT

No, not at all.

ROBERT

May I ask if you sent a telegraphic dispatch to Miss Graham last September stating that you were dangerously ill and that you wished to see her?

MRS. VINCENT

I had no occasion to send such a message. I have never been seriously ill in my life.

ROBERT

Will you tell me at what date the young lady first came to you.

MRS. VINCENT

It is not the least use to ask me, Mr. Audley. I never did and never could remember dates. I haven't the remotest idea when Miss Graham came to me, although I know it was ages ago, for it was the very summer I had my peach-colored silk. Miss Tonks?

MISS TONKS

She came in August 1854. It was on a Tuesday.

MRS. VINCENT

Thank you, Tonks. You are a most invaluable darling. Is there anything else Tonks or I can tell you, Mr. Audley?

ROBERT

Can you tell me where Miss Graham came from when she entered your household?

MRS. VINCENT

Not very precisely. I have a vague notion that Miss Graham said something about coming from the seaside, but she didn't say where, or if she did, I have forgotten it. Tonks, did Miss Graham tell you where she came from?

MISS TONKS

Miss Graham told me nothing. She was too clever for that. She knows how to keep her secrets, in spite of her innocent ways.

ROBERT

You think she had secrets?

MISS TONKS

All manner of secrets. I wouldn't have engaged such a person as junior teacher in a respectable school without so much as one word of recommendation from anyone.

ROBERT

You had no reference, then, from Miss Graham?

MRS. VINCENT

No. I waived that. Miss Graham waived the question of salary. I could not do less than waive the question of reference. She quarreled with her papa, she told me, and she wanted to find a home away from all the people she had ever known. She had endured so much, she said. How could I press her for a reference under these circumstances, especially when I saw that she was a perfect lady? You know Lucy Graham was a perfect lady, Tonks.

MISS TONKS

When people make favorites, they are apt to be deceived in them.

MRS. VINCENT

I never made her a favorite, you jealous Tonks. You know I never did.

MISS TONKS

Oh, no? You said she was ideally ornamental, a person to be shown off to visitors and to play fantasias for them on the drawing-room piano.

ROBERT

Then can you give me no clue to Miss Graham's previous history?

MISS TONKS and MRS. VINCENT

No.

ROBERT

I have only one more question to ask. Did Miss Graham leave any books or knick-knacks or any other kind of property behind when she left your establishment?

MRS. VINCENT

Not to my knowledge.

MISS TONKS

Yes! She left this box.

ROBERT

I should very much like to take a look at it, if you wouldn't mind..

(SHE gives it to ROBERT. HE examines it.)

ROBERT

Two shipments. Two labels. One for Miss Graham. The other a different name entirely. I need intrude upon you no longer, ladies. I am extremely obliged to you both.

Wildernsea, Yorkshire. A small, old-fashioned cottage by the sea. Interior. A few days later. March 1859. MRS. BARKAMB sits primly in a chair across from ROBERT.

ROBERT

Thank you, Mrs. Barkamb. You were the owner of the house which you let to Captain Maldon and his daughter Helen. I've come to ask one simple question. I wish to discover the exact date of Mrs. Talboys' departure from Wildernsea.

MRS. BARKAMB

You are aware that Mrs. Talboys left rather abruptly?

ROBERT

I was not aware of that fact.

MRS. BARKAMB

Indeed! Poor little woman. She tried to support herself after her husband's desertion by giving music lessons. She was a very good pianist and succeeded pretty well, I believe, but I suppose her father took her money from her and spent it in public houses. They had a very serious misunderstanding one night and the next morning Mrs. Talboys left Wildernsea, leaving her little boy with a nurse in the neighborhood.

ROBERT

But can you tell me the date of her leaving?

MRS. BARKAMB

Captain Maldon wrote to me the day his daughter left. He was in very great distress, poor gentleman, and he always came to me in his troubles. If I could find that letter, it might be dated, you know, mightn't it?

(SHE goes to an old mahogany desk near the window on which many letters and documents are cluttered, and searches through the mess. Finally...)

I've got the letter and there's a note inside it from Mrs. Talboys. Oh, that man tried my patience indeed. He rarely paid the rent and was always in arrears.

(We see LIEUTENANT MALDON)

MALDON

My generous friend, I am in the depths of despair. My daughter has left me! We had words last night upon the subject of money, which has always been a disagreeable matter between us. The enclosed from Helen was waiting for me. Henry Maldon, North Cottages, August 16th, 1854

(We see HELEN TALBOYS, aka. LUCY GRAHAM)

HELEN

'I have resolved to go out into the world, to seek another home and escape from this sordid misery. You will never find me. I will change my name and absolve my past. When I am able, I will send money anonymously for the care of my little Georgey.'

ROBERT

I have traced the histories of Lucy Graham and Helen Talboys to a vanishing point. Now I must discover the identity of the woman who lies buried in Ventnor churchyard.

Figtree Court. Interior. March 1859. ROBERT sits in his chambers READING a letter. We see ALICIA.

ALICIA

Papa is much better and is anxious to have you at Audley Court. For some inexplicable reason, my stepmother has taken it into her head that your presence is extremely desirable and worries me with her frivolous questions about your movements. Pray, come without delay and set these people at rest. Your affectionate cousin, Alicia.

ROBERT

Ah! My lady is anxious to know my movements. She questions her stepdaughter in that bewitching, childlike manner. Why doesn't she run away while there is still time? I have given her fair warning. I have no wish to punish. I only wish to do my duty. I will give her one more warning, a full and fair one, and then...

(A knock on the door.)

It is open! Please come in.

(CLARA ENTERS)

Clara Talboys! What a surprise!

CLARA

Mr. Audley, I have lost all patience! Have you no sense of urgency about this matter? You promised to write to me if you made any discovery which carried you nearer to the mystery of my brother's disappearance. You have not written. I must conclude, then, that you have discovered nothing. I determined to come here to inquire directly.

ROBERT

(Silence)

The chain of circumstantial evidence which joins the mystery of your brother's fate with the person I suspect is formed of very slight links. I think that I have added another link to that chain since I saw you at your father's estate.

CLARA

And you refuse to tell me what it is that you have discovered?

ROBERT

Only until I have discovered more.

CLARA

I thought you were going to Wildernsea.

ROBERT

I have been there.

CLARA

It was there that you made some discovery, then?

ROBERT

It was. You must remember, Miss Talboys, that the sole ground upon which my suspicions rest is the identity of two individuals who have no apparent connection to each other, one of whom is supposed to be dead. If your brother's wife, Helen Talboys, died when *The Times* said she did and if the woman who lies buried in Ventnor churchyard is indeed the woman whose name is inscribed on the headstone of that grave, I have no case. I am about to put this to the test. I am now in a position to play a bold game and I believe that I shall soon arrive at the truth.

CLARA

I too have discovered a few things since we met. You failed to mention, Mr. Audley that you are the nephew of Sir Michael Audley, the most famous person in all of Essex, a widower for sixteen years, who married a penniless young governess a year and a half ago. Quite a romantic story, indeed! I'm sure you have not failed to notice that the young and pretty Lady Audley quite resembles the description of his wife contained in one of my brother's letters which I sent to you at your request. When were you planning to tell me this, Mr. Audley?

(ROBERT is silent, even embarrassed.)

I trust you will not suffer my brother's fate to remain a mystery much longer, Mr. Audley!

Audley Court. Exterior. The courtyard. March 1859.. Dusk. ROBERT stands, smoking at the well. The clatter of horses and carriage. LADY AUDLEY and ALICIA ENTER.

LADY AUDLEY

So, truant, you have come back to us? And now that you have returned, we shall keep you prisoner. We won't let him run away again, will we, Alicia?

ALICIA

Since Robert Audley has taken it into his head to conduct himself like some ghost-haunted her in an eerie story, I have given up attempting to understand him.

LADY AUDLEY

And pray, where have you been wandering during the last day or two, Mr. Audley?

ROBERT

I have been in Yorkshire, at the watering place where George Talboys lived at the time of his marriage.

LADY AUDLEY

(Startled)

I must dress for dinner and I want to see Sir Michael. We are going to a dinner party.

ROBERT

I must insist that you to spare me a moment, Lady Audley. I came here to speak to you.

LADY AUDLEY

What can you want to talk to me about, Mr. Audley?

ROBERT

(Glancing at ALICIA)

I will tell you when we are alone.

ALICIA

So! It is for my lady's sake that you have become such a disconsolate soul.

(ALICIA EXITS into the mansion)

ROBERT

You are shivering. Let us walk under the Lime Trees.

LADY AUDLEY

I am quite cold. I would rather speak to you some other day, tomorrow, if you will.

ROBERT

If I am cruel, it is you who have made me cruel. You might have escaped this ordeal. You might have avoided me. I gave you fair warning, but you have chosen to defy me.

LADY AUDLEY

Why do you bring me to this horrible place to frighten me out of my poor wits? You ought to know how nervous I am.

ROBERT

Nervous, my lady?

LADY AUDLEY

Dreadfully nervous. I am worth a fortune to Dr. Dawson. He sends me camphor, and *sal volatile* and red lavender and all kinds of mixtures, but he can't cure me.

ROBERT

I doubt Mr. Dawson can minister to a diseased mind.

LADY AUDLEY

Who said that my mind was diseased?

ROBERT

I say so, my lady. Heaven knows I wish to be merciful, that I would spare you, but justice must be done. Shall I tell you why you are nervous in this house?

LADY AUDLEY

(Laughs)

If you can.

ROBERT

For you this house is haunted.

LADY AUDLEY

Haunted?

ROBERT

Haunted by the ghost of George Talboys.

LADY AUDLEY

What do you mean? Why do you torment me about this George Talboys, who has taken it into his head to keep out of your way for a few months? Are you going mad, Mr. Audley? Why this monomania?

ROBERT

He was a stranger to you, my lady, was he not?

LADY AUDLEY

Of course!

ROBERT

Shall I tell you the story of my friend's disappearance as I read that story, my lady?

LADY AUDLEY

No! I wish to know nothing of your friend. If he is dead, I am sorry for him. If he lives, I have no wish either to see him or to hear of him. Stop detaining me! Let me go in to see my husband.

ROBERT

I will detain you until you have heard what I have to say, Lady Audley. When you have heard me you shall take your own course of action.

LADY AUDLEY

Very well, then, pray lose no time in saying what you have to say.

ROBERT

When George Talboys returned to England, the thought which was uppermost in his mind was the thought of his wife.

LADY AUDLEY

Whom he had deserted. I remember your telling us something to that effect.

ROBERT

I saw him within a few hours of his reaching England. I was witness to the joy with which he looked forward to his reunion with his wife. I was also witness to the blow which struck him to the very heart, the announcement of his wife's death in *The Times*. I now believe that announcement was a black and bitter lie.

LADY AUDLEY

What reason could anyone have for announcing the death of Mrs. Talboys if she had been alive?

ROBERT

If she had taken advantage of his absence to win a richer husband. If she had married again and wished to throw my poor friend off the scent by this false announcement.

LADY AUDLEY

Your suppositions are rather ridiculous, Mr. Audley.

ROBERT

The Colchester paper, dated July 2nd, 1857, printed a brief paragraph to the effect that a Mr. George Talboys had arrived at Sydney from the gold fields carrying with him a nugget worth twenty thousand pounds and sailed for Liverpool on the clipper *Argus*. Any person residing in Essex at that time would have been aware of George Talboy's return from Australia. I believe *The Times* announcement was part of a conspiracy by Helen Talboys and Lieutenant Maldon against my poor friend.

LADY AUDLEY

A conspiracy!

ROBERT

Yes.

LADY AUDLEY

You said you had been to the Ventnor grave with Mr. Talboys. Who was it that died at Ventnor if it was not Mrs. Talboys?

ROBERT

Ah, Lady Audley, that is a question which only two or three people can answer and one of those persons shall answer to me before long, unless...

LADY AUDLEY

Unless what?

ROBERT

Unless the woman I wish to save from degradation and punishment accepts the mercy I offer her while there is still time.

LADY AUDLEY

(Laughs)

She would be a very foolish woman to be influenced by these absurdities. You are hypochondriacal, Mr. Audley. You lose your friend in a mysterious manner. You confess that he became an altered man after his wife's death. What more likely, then, than he grew tired of civilized life and ran away to those savage gold fields as he had the first time. You build up some absurd theory of a conspiracy which has no existence except in your own overheated brain. Helen Talboys is dead. The Times declared she is dead. The headstone of the grave in Ventnor churchyard bears her name. By what right, Mr. Audley, do you come to me and torment me about George Talboys? By what right do you dare to say that his wife is still alive?

ROBERT

By the right of circumstantial evidence.

LADY AUDLEY

What circumstantial evidence?

ROBERT

The evidence of handwriting. When Helen Talboys left her father's at Wildernsea, she left a letter behind her in which she said she was weary of her old life and wished to seek a new home and a new fortune. The letter is in my possession. Shall I tell you whose handwriting strongly resembles that of Helen Talboys?

LADY AUDLEY

I could show you the caligraphies of half-a-dozen female correspondents and defy you to discover any great difference in them. You cannot deny the fact of Helen Talboys' death on the ground that her handwriting resembles that of some surviving person.

ROBERT

Defiance will not serve you. The time has come when I must speak very plainly to you. The evidence against you wants only one link to be strong enough for your condemnation. That link shall be added. Helen Talboys went away from Wildernsea, deserting her poor father and infant son, with determined to hide her identity. She disappeared upon the 16th of August 1854 and the next day reappeared as Lucy Graham, who was hired on in a home which asked no questions.

LADY AUDLEY

You have proved nothing. You are mad, Mr. Audley! You are mad and my husband shall protect me from your insolence.

ROBERT

I have in my possession two labels, pasted one over the other upon a box left by you in possession of Mrs. Vincent. The upper label bears the name of Miss Graham, the lower that of Mrs. George Talboys. This evidence clearly links the two. Can you produce witnesses who will declare otherwise? Where had you been living prior to your appearance at Crescent Villas?

LADY AUDLEY

If I were placed in a criminal dock I would bring witnesses forward to refute your accusations. But I am not in a criminal dock! If you insist on proclaiming Helen Talboys is not dead and I am Helen Talboys, you may do so. If you choose to go wandering about in the places in which I have lived and the places in which this Mrs. Talboys lived, you may do so as well, but I warn you that such morbid fancies have oft conducted people, not unlike yourself, to the life-long imprisonment of a private lunatic asylum.

ROBERT

(Recoils at the threat)

It is to be a duel to the death, then, my lady. You refused to accept my warning. You refuse to run away and repent your wickedness in some foreign place. You choose to remain here and defy me.

LADY AUDLEY

I do. It is no fault of mine if my husband's nephew goes mad and chooses me as the victim of his monomania. It is no fault of mine that your fascinations for one as young and I dare say pretty as me, jilted by my resistance, pushed you to this insaneness.

ROBERT

Mr. Talboys was last seen here at Audley Court, inquiring for you. I believe he met his death within these grounds and that his body lies hidden below some quiet water or in some forgotten corner of this place. I will have such a search made as shall level this house to the earth and root up every tree in these gardens. I will not fail to find the grave of my murdered friend.

(LADY AUDLEY utters a long, low, wailing cry and throws her arms above her head with a wild gesture of despair. Again, SHE resembles the portrait. Her arms slowly drop and SHE stares hatefully at ROBERT.)

LADY AUDLEY

I will kill you first! What harm have I ever done you that you should make yourself my persecutor, dog my every step and play the spy upon me? Do you want to drive me mad? Do you know what it's like to wrestle with a mad woman? No, you do not, or you would never...

(SHE draws herself up)

Go away, Mr. Audley. I am not mad. It is you! I tell you, you are mad. You have become a monomaniac!

ROBERT

I am going, my lady. I would have condoned your crimes out of pity for your wretchedness. I would have wished to have pity on the living. I shall henceforth only remember my duty to the dead.

(ALICIA ENTERS)

ALICIA

Robert, here you are, still! Papa has come down to the library and surely will be glad to see you.

LADY AUDLEY

I don't know what has come to your cousin. He is eccentric beyond my comprehension.

ALICIA

I should imagine, from the length of your tete-a-tete that you had made some effort to understand him

ROBERT

My lady and I understand each other very well, but as it is growing late I will wish you good evening, ladies. I shall sleep tonight at Mount Stanning, as I have some business to attend to there. I will come and see my uncle tomorrow.

ALICIA

Robert, surely you won't go away without seeing papa!

ROBERT

Yes, my dear. I am disturbed by some disagreeable business in which I am very much concerned and I would rather not see my uncle. Good night, Alicia, I will come or write tomorrow.

(ROBERT EXITS)

LADY AUDLEY

Your cousin is a very handsome young man and, I believe, goodhearted, but he must be watched, Alicia, for he is mad!

ALICIA

Mad! Eccentric, to be sure, but mad? You are dreaming, my lady or trying to frighten me.

LADY AUDLEY

Mr. Audley may be as you say, merely eccentric; but he has talked to me this evening in a manner that has filled me with absolute terror, and I believe that he is going mad. I shall speak very seriously to Sir Michael this very night.'

ALICIA

Speak to papa? You surely won't distress papa by suggesting such a possibility!'

LADY AUDLEY

I shall only put him on his guard, my dear Alicia.

ALICIA

But he'll never believe you. He will laugh at such an idea.

LADY AUDLEY

No, Alicia, he will believe anything that I tell him.

Audley Court. Interior. The drawing room. That evening. SIR MICHAEL is seated in a comfortable chair by the fireplace. LADY AUDLEY ENTERS.

SIR MICHAEL

Darling, I've been waiting for you. Where have you been? What have you been doing?

LADY AUDLEY

(Pause. She's in the shadows)

I have been to Chelmsford, shopping and...

SIR MICHAEL

...Since you came from Chelmsford? I heard a carriage stop at the door a good while ago. It was yours, was it not?

LADY AUDLEY

I have been talking to Mr. Robert Audley.

SIR MICHAEL

Robert! Is Robert here?

LADY AUDLEY

He was here a little while ago.

SIR MICHAEL

And is still here, I suppose?

LADY AUDLEY

No, he has gone away.

SIR MICHAEL

Gone away! Why? What do you mean, my darling?

LADY AUDLEY

Your nephew came to the Court this afternoon. Alicia and I found him idling about the gardens. He stayed here till about a quarter of an hour ago talking to me and then he hurried off muttering some ridiculous excuse about business at Mount Stanning.

SIR MICHAEL

Business at Mount Stanning! Why, what business can he possibly have in that out-of-the-way-place? Has he gone to overnight at Mount Stanning?

LADY AUDLEY

He said something to that effect.

SIR MICHAEL

Upon my word! I think that boy is half mad.

(LADY AUDLEY smiles, unseen. SHE sits childishly on a velvet-covered footstool at SIR MICHAEL's feet.)

LADY AUDLEY

I wanted to come to you, you know, dear. I wanted to come to you directly, but Mr. Audley insisted upon my stopping to talk to him.

SIR MICHAEL

But what about, my love? What could Robert have to say to you?

(SHE drops her head upon his knee. HE lifts her head up so that SHE is looking directly at HIM.)

Lucy, Lucy! What is the meaning of this? My love, my love! What has happened to distress you in this manner?

(Overwhelmed, SHE sobs with grief. HE is bewildered.)

Lucy, I insist upon your telling me what and who has distressed you. Whoever has annoyed you shall answer to me for your grief. Come, my love, tell me directly what it is.

(SHE stops weeping. Looks up.)

LADY AUDLEY

I am very silly, but really he has made me quite hysterical.

SIR MICHAEL

Robert?

LADY AUDLEY

Yes. I'm afraid.

SIR MICHAEL

Lucy, what do you mean?

LADY AUDLEY

Mr. Audley insisted upon my going with him into the lime-walk. He said such horrible things that...

SIR MICHAEL

What horrible things, Lucy? What did he say?

LADY AUDLEY

(Shudders. Clings to HIS hand)

Oh, how can I tell you? I know that I shall distress you or you will laugh at me.

SIR MICHAEL

Laugh at you? No, Lucy.

LADY AUDLEY

(Silence. Looks into the fire. Then, slowly)

My dear, have you ever...I am so afraid of vexing you...have you ever thought Mr. Audley a little...a little...

SIR MICHAEL

A little what, my darling?

LADY AUDLEY

A little out of his mind?

SIR MICHAEL

Out of his mind! My dear girl, what are you thinking of?

LADY AUDLEY

You said just now that you thought he was half mad.

SIR MICHAEL

Did I? If I did it was a mere manner of speech. I don't think he has brains enough for madness. I believe it's generally your great intellects that get out of order.

LADY AUDLEY

But madness is sometimes hereditary. Mr. Audley may have inherited...

SIR MICHAEL

Not from his father's family. The Audleys have never peopled private lunatic asylums or fed mad doctors.

LADY AUDLEY

Nor from his mother's family?

SIR MICHAEL

Not to my knowledge.

LADY AUDLEY

People generally keep these things a secret. There may have been madness in your sister-in-law's family.

SIR MICHAEL

I don't think so, my dear. What, in Heaven's name, has put this idea into your head?

LADY AUDLEY

I can account for your nephew's conduct in no other manner. If you heard the things he said to me tonight, you too would have thought him mad.

SIR MICHAEL

But what did he say, Lucy?

LADY AUDLEY

I can scarcely tell you. Perhaps he has lived too long alone in those solitary chambers. Perhaps he reads too much or smokes too much.

(SHE continues to stare at the fire)

People are insane for years and years before their insanity is found out. They know that they are mad, but they know how to keep their secret. But they do often betray themselves. They commit a crime. The knife is in their hand, the victim by their side. They may conquer the restless demon or yield to the horrible temptation, the frightful, hungry craving for violence and horror. Our doctors know so little about any of it.

(Pause. Intensely)

Robert Audley is a monomaniac. The disappearance of his friend, George Talboys, grieved and bewildered him. He has dwelt upon this one idea and lost the power of thinking of anything else. He looks at a common event with a vision that is diseased. He declared tonight that George Talboys was murdered in this place and that he will root up every tree in the garden and pull down every brick in the house in search for...

SIR MICHAEL

Pull down this house? George Talboys murdered at Audley Court? Robert said this?

LADY AUDLEY

Yes, my dear. You must never let me see him again. He has me terrorized.

SIR MICHAEL

Did he really say this, Lucy, or did you misunderstand him?

LADY AUDLEY

You saw how frightened I was when I first came in.

SIR MICHAEL

This Mr. Talboys, a perfect stranger to all of us, murdered in Audley Court! I'll go to Mount Stanning tonight and see Robert. I have known him since he was a baby. If there is anything wrong he will not be able to conceal it from me.

LADY AUDLEY

No. You must not go to Mount Stanning, my darling. Remember that you are under strict orders to stay indoors until the weather is milder.

SIR MICHAEL

(Sinks back into his chair)

True. We must obey Dr. Dawson. I can't believe there is anything wrong with the poor boy. I can't believe it, Lucy.

LADY AUDLEY

Then how do you account for this monomaniacal delusion?

SIR MICHAEL

I don't know, Lucy I can't believe my nephew's mind is impaired. I can't believe it. I'll watch him closely the next time he comes here. I'll find out if there's anything wrong. But, why were you so frightened? His wild talk was certainly not directed at you.

LADY AUDLEY

You must think me stronger than I am. I know I shall never be able to see Mr. Audley again.

SIR MICHAEL

And you shall not, my dear. You shall not.

LADY AUDLEY

You would not have him here?

SIR MICHAEL

I will not, if his presence annoys you. Good Heaven, Lucy! Can you imagine for a moment that I have any higher wish than your happiness?

LADY AUDLEY

You must think me very unkind, dear, but he seems to have taken some absurd notion into his head about me.

SIR MICHAEL

About you, Lucy?

LADY AUDLEY

Yes. He connects me in some vague manner with the disappearance of this Mr. Talboys.

SIR MICHAEL

Lucy! You must have misunderstood him!

LADY AUDLEY

I do not at all think so.

SIR MICHAEL

I will wait until he goes back to town and then send a physician to his chambers to examine him. What a mysterious business this is.

LADY AUDLEY

I fear I have distressed you, darling.

SIR MICHAEL

I am very much distressed, but you were quite right to talk to me frankly. I must think it over and try and decide what is best to be done.

LADY AUDLEY

How good you have always been to me, dear.

Audley Court. Interior. LADY AUDEY'S chambers. Late that evening. SHE sits in front of a mirror, brushing her hair. A feeble knock on the door.

LADY AUDLEY

Come in!

(PHOEBE ENTERS.)

PHOEBE

I beg pardon, my lady, for intruding without leave.

LADY AUDLEY

Phoebe. Come, sit down and talk to me. I am glad you came tonight. I was feeling horribly lonely in this dreary place.

PHOEBE

Sir Michael is better, I hope, my lady.

LADY AUDLEY

Yes, Phoebe. He is asleep. You may close that door.

(PHOEBE does so meekly)

I am unhappy, Phoebe, wretchedly miserable.

PHOEBE

It is about your secret?

LADY AUDLEY

I am pursued and tormented by a man whom I never injured, whom I have never wished to injure.

PHOEBE

I think I know whom you mean, my lady. I think I know who it is who is so cruel to you. The person is a gentleman, is he not, my lady?

LADY AUDLEY

Yes.

PHOEBE

A gentleman who came to the Castle Inn two months ago, when I warned you.

LADY AUDLEY

Yes, yes.

PHOEBE

The same gentleman is at our place tonight.

LADY AUDLEY

At the Castle Inn? I might have known. He has gone there to ring my secrets from your husband. You have left those two men together? Fool!

PHOEBE

(Submissively)

I didn't come of my own free will, my lady. I was sent here.

LADY AUDLEY

Who sent you here?

PHOEBE

Luke, my lady. I can't tell you how hard he can be if I go against him. He bore me down with his loud, blustering talk and made me come.

LADY AUDLEY

Why?

PHOEBE

I can't get him to be careful or steady. When he's drinking with a lot of rough countrymen, his head can't be clear for managing accounts. If it hadn't been for me we should have been ruined before this. You remember giving me the money for the brewer's bill, my lady?

LADY AUDLEY

Yes, I remember very well.

PHOEBE

It was very hard for me to have to come and ask you for it, after all that we'd received from you before. But that isn't the worst. When Luke sent me down here to beg the favor of that help he never told me that the Christmas rent was still owing, but it was, my lady, and it's owing now and...and there's a bailiff in the house tonight and we're to be sold up tomorrow unless...

LADY AUDLEY

Unless I pay your rent, I suppose. I might have guessed what was coming.

PHOEBE

(Sobbing)

Indeed, my lady, I wouldn't have asked it, but he made me come.

LADY AUDLEY

Yes, he made you come and he will make you come whenever he pleases and whenever he wants money for the gratification of his vices. I suppose when my purse is empty and my credit ruined, you and your husband will turn upon me and sell me to the highest bidder. What can I do to appease you? How shall I satisfy you next?

PHOEBE

Oh, my lady, don't be so cruel to me. It isn't I who want to impose upon you.

LADY AUDLEY

I know nothing except that I am the most miserable of women. Let me think.

(PHOEBE continues to sob)

Hold your tongue, girl! Let me think of this business if I can.

(Silence. SHE puts her hands to her forehead.)

Robert Audley is with your husband and there is a bailiff in the house. Your brutal husband is no doubt drunk by now and obstinate and ferocious. If I refuse to pay this money his ferocity will be multiplied by a hundredfold. The money must be paid.

PHOEBE

If you do pay it, I hope you will impress upon Luke that it is the last money you will ever give him.

LADY AUDLEY

Why?

PHOEBE

Because I want Luke to leave the Castle.

LADY AUDLEY

But why do you want him to leave?

PHOEBE

He's not fit to be the landlord of a public house. I didn't know that when I married him. He's scarcely sober after dark and when he's drunk he get almost wild and doesn't seem to know what he does. We've had two or three narrow escapes with him already.

LADY AUDLEY

What do you mean?

PHOEBE

We've run the risk of being burnt in our beds through his carelessness. You know what a queer old place the Castle is, my lady, all tumbledown woodwork and rotten rafters. The Chelmsford Insurance Company won't insure it. When Luke's tipsy he doesn't know what he's about. Only a week ago he left a candle burning in one of the out-houses. If it hadn't been for me finding it, we should have all been burnt to death.

LADY AUDLEY

(SHE Rises)

The money is in my dressing room. I will go and fetch it.

PHOEBE

Oh, my lady, I forgot something. I was in such a way about this business that I quite forgot it.

LADY AUDLEY

Quite forgot what?

PHOEBE

A letter from Mr. Audley. He heard my husband mention that I was coming down here and he asked me to carry this letter.

LADY AUDLEY

(Snatches the letter from her)

Give it to me. Let me see what more he has to say.

(We see ROBERT.)

ROBERT

Should Mrs. George Talboys really have survived the date of her supposed death and should she exist in the person of the lady suspected and accused by the writer of this, there can be no great difficulty in finding someone able and willing to identify her. Mrs. Barkamb, the owner of North Cottages, Wildernsea, will consent to throw ample light upon this matter. Robert Audley, March 3, 1859. The Castle Inn, Mount Stanning.

(LADY AUDLEY rips up the letter and begins pacing up and down the room.)

LADY AUDLEY

He will do it! He will do it, unless I get him into a lunatic asylum first, or ...He will do it, unless some strange calamity befalls him and silences him forever.

(SHE stops suddenly. HER features once again resemble the portrait seen earlier. SHE remains still for a long moment. PHOEBE looks on fearfully. SHE EXITS to a different room and RE-ENTERS dressed in back coat and hood we saw earlier.)

PHOEBE

My lady, you are not going out tonight?

LADY AUDLEY

Yes, I am, Phoebe. I am going to Mount Stanning with you to see this bailiff and to pay and dismiss him myself.

PHOEBE

But, my lady, you forget what the time is. You can't go out at such an hour. Tomorrow will do quite as well. A week hence will do as well. Our landlord would take the man away if had your promised to settle the debt.

LADY AUDLEY

Now, Phoebe Marks, listen to me. I am going to the Castle Inn tonight. Whether it is early or late is of little consequence to me. I have set my mind upon going and I shall go. You have asked me why and I have told you. I am going in order to see for myself that the money I give is applied to the purpose for which I give it. I am going to do what other women in my position very often do. I am going to assist a favorite servant.

PHOEBE

But it's getting on for twelve o'clock, my lady.

LADY AUDLEY

If my going to your house to pay this man should be known, I am ready to answer for my conduct, but I would rather the business be kept quiet. I think I can leave this house without being seen, if you will do as I tell you.

PHOEBE

I will do anything you wish, my lady

LADY AUDLEY

Then you will wish me good night. You will cross the courtyard and wait for me in the avenue outside the grounds. I must not leave my room till the servants have all gone to bed. Wait for me patiently, for come what may I will join you. It is three miles from here to Mount Stanning, isn't it?

PHOEBE

Yes, my lady.

LADY AUDLEY

Then we can walk the distance in an hour and a half. Mr. Audley will be asleep by then, won't he?

PHOEBE

He was retiring for the night as I departed.

LADY AUDLEY

Good. Now, take your leave and wait for me.

PHOEBE

Yes, my lady.

(Loudly)

Good night, my lady.

(SHE EXITS)

The Castle Inn. Interior. The bar parlor, as seen earlier. Later that night. LUKE, seated at a table, is clearly drunk. His speech will be slurred. The BAILIFF is slouched at the table in an advanced state of intoxication. HE will make imbecile attempts to light his pipe at the flame of a candle near him. PHOEBE and LADY AUDLEY ENTER. PHOEBE lights and holds a candle.

LUKE

So you've condescended to come home at last. I thought you was never coming no more.

PHOEBE

I've been longer than I intended to be, Luke, but I've seen my lady and she's been very kind and she'll settle this business for us.

LUKE

She's been very kind, has she? Thank her for nothing. I know the valley of her kindness. She'd not be uncommon kind, I dessay, if she warn't obligated to be it.

PHOEBE

My lady has promised to settle the business for us, Luke.

LADY AUDLEY

Yes, Luke Marks, I have come to pay this man and to send him about his business.

(LUKE sets his glass down and growls discontentedly)

LUKE

You might have given the money to Phoebe, as ell as have brought it yourself. We don't want no fine ladies up here, pryin' and pokin' their precious noses into everything.

PHOEBE

Luke, Luke! When my lady has been so kind!

LUKE

Oh, damn her kindness. It ain't her kindness we want, gal, it's her money. She won't get no snivelin' gratitood from me. Whatever she does for us she does because she is obliged and if she wasn't obliged she wouldn't do it.

(LADY AUDLEY moves close to LUKE and stands over him, her wind-blown hair in a tangled mass and her eyes blazing.)

LADY AUDLEY

Stop! I didn't come here in the dead of night to listen to your insolence. How much is this debt?

LUKE

Nine pound.

(SHE takes out her purse and lays a note and four sovereigns on the table.)

LADY AUDLEY

Let that man give me a receipt for the money before I go.

(With great difficulty, LUKE rouses the BAILIFF, create a receipt and push a pen between his clumsy fingers. LADY AUDLEY takes the document and turns to leave.)

PHOEBE

You musn't go home alone, my lady. You'll let me go with you?

LADY AUDLEY

Yes. Yes. You shall go home with me.

(LADY AUDLEY lingers at the door stare irresolutely and absentmindedly into the night. The clock strikes two. SHE trembles.)

I think I am going to faint, Phoebe. Where can I get some cold water?

PHOEBE

The pump is in the washhouse, my lady. I'll run and get you a glass of cold water.

(LADY AUDLEY clutches PHOEBE's arm to hold her back)

LADY AUDLEY

No, no! I'll get it myself. I must dip my head in a basin of water if I want to save myself from fainting. In which room does Mr. Audley sleep?

(Silence. PHOEBE is aghast and stares at her)

PHOEBE

It was number three that I got ready, my lady...the front room...the room next to ours.

LADY AUDLEY

Give me a candle and your key. I'll go into your room and get some water. See that that brute of a husband of yours does not follow me.

(SHE snatches the candle that PHOEBE had lit. EXITS)

Castle Inn. Interior. Outside two dilapidated, adjoining bedrooms. LADY AUDLEY locks the door of the first room, then enters the second. It's furnished with an array of cheap chintz draperies hanging from the bedstead and window. A dresser and mirror are covered and framed respectively with starched muslin and glazed calico, adorned with frill of lace and knitted work. LADY AUDLEY lowers her hood, goes to the washstand, fills the basin with water and plunged her hair into the water. SHE stands before the mirror and pats down her hair before restoring her hood. SHE smiles sardonically places the candle very close to the lace furbelows on the mirror, so close that the starched muslin seems to draw the flame toward it. EXITS.

Castle Inn. Exterior. The dark, windy night. PHOEBE waits. LADY AUDLEY ENTERS.

PHOEBE

The light, my lady. You left it in the bedroom!

LADY AUDLEY

I did. The wind blew it out as I was leaving your room.

PHOEBE

In my room, my lady?

LADY AUDLEY

Yes.

PHOEBE

And it was quite out?

LADY AUDLEY

Yes! Why do you worry about your candle? It is past two o'clock. Come.

(SHE takes PHOEBE's arm and half leads, half drags her from the inn. We see them walking in the night. A fierce wind howls around them. THEY stop to rest. Suddenly, the night sky is no longer pitch dark. In the distance, behind them, an expanding patch of light breaks the blackness. PHOEBE sees it first.)

PHOEBE

(Clutching at LADY AUDLEY's robe.)

My lady, my lady! Do you see?

LADY AUDLEY

Yes, child, I see. What's the matter?

PHOEBE

It's a fire... a fire, my lady!

LADY AUDLEY

Yes, at Brentwood, most likely. Let me go, Phoebe. It's nothing to us.

PHOEBE

My lady, it's much nearer than Brentwood. It's at Mount Stanning, my lady! It's the Castle that's on fire. I know it is. I know it is! I knew this would happen some day. I wouldn't mind if it was only the wretched place, but there'll be life lost! There's Luke, too tipsy to help himself, unless others help him. There's Mr. Audley asleep...

(SHE stops suddenly. SHE falls on her knees, appealing wildly to LADY AUDLEY.)

Oh, my God! Say it's not true, my lady! Say it's not true! It's too horrible!

LADY AUDLEY

What's too horrible?

PHOEBE

The terrible thought that's in my mind.

LADY AUDLEY

What do you mean, girl?

PHOEBE

Why did you go to the Castle, my lady? Why were you so set on going, you who are so bitter against Mr. Audley and Luke? You knew they were both under that roof! Oh, tell me that I do you wrong, my lady. Tell me! I think that you went to that place tonight on purpose to set fire to it. Tell me that I do you a wicked wrong.

LADY AUDLEY

I will tell you nothing! Get up, fool, coward! Is your husband such a precious bargain that you should be groveling here, lamenting and groaning for him? What is Robert Audley to you that you behave like a maniac? The fire could be anywhere! Get up and go back and look after your husband and your lodger. Get up and go. I don't want you!

PHOEBE

I don't mind your cruel words. I don't mind anything if I'm wrong.

LADY AUDLEY

Go back and see for yourself. I tell you again. I don't want you.

(SHE EXITS into the darkness, leaving PHOEBE kneeling on the road. The red blaze in the distance lights up the night sky.)

Audley Court. Interior. The next day. SIR MICHAEL and ALICIA are having breakfast in the drawing room by the fire. LADY AUDLEY ENTERS, visibly pale and tired.

SIR MICHAEL

Good morning, my dear!

LADY AUDLEY

Michael, Alicia.

ALICIA

My lady, if you do not mind my saying so, you look as if you've been up all night.

LADY AUDLEY

I was, practically! I became engrossed in some stupid novel and stayed up till nearly three o'clock till I finished it. The build-up was most intriguing, but the ending was a major disappointment. How such writers get published is beyond me.

ALICIA

(Looking out at the drizzling rain)

Such a bleak morning. The rain has been incessant. There will be no morning post, I'm sure. We haven't seen the newspapers yet. No riding today and no chance of any callers to enliven us, unless that ridiculous Bob comes crawling through the wet from Mount Stanning.

LADY AUDLEY

We will have a day's relief from his monomaniacal pursuit of his friend's disappearance.

ALICIA

Who knows? He may well come down here in the wet, perhaps. His behavior is entirely unpredictable. He'll come with his hat sleek and shining as if it had been brushed with a pat of fresh butter and with white vapors steaming out of his clothes, and making look like an awkward genie just let out of his bottle. He will come down here and print impressions of his muddy boots all over the carpet and he'll sit on your Gobelin tapestry, my lady, in his wet overcoat and he'll abuse you if you remonstrate, and will ask why people have chairs that are not to be sat upon and why you don't live in Figtree Court and...'

SIR MICHAEL

Major Melville visited called on me, yesterday, Alicia. What do you think he told me?

ALICIA

I haven't the remotest idea. Perhaps he told you that we should have another war before long, by God, sir, or perhaps he told you that we should have a new ministry. Some fellows are getting themselves into a mess, father, others are reforming this or that. With all the reform, by God, we shall have no army at all, nothing but a pack of boys crammed up to the eyes with a lot of senseless schoolmasters' rubbish and dressed in shell-jackets and calico helmets in the Indian state.

SIR MICHAEL

You're an impertinent minx, miss. Major Melville told me nothing of the kind. He told me that a very devoted admirer of you, a certain Sir Harry Towers has forsaken his place in Hertfordshire and his hunting stable and has gone on the continent for a twelve month tour.

ALICIA

He has gone on the continent, has he? He told me that he meant to do so if he didn't have everything his own way. Poor fellow! He's a dear, good-hearted, stupid creature and twenty times better than that peripatetic, patent refrigerator, Mr. Robert Audley.

SIR MICHAEL

I wish, Alicia, you were not so fond of ridiculing Bob. Bob is a good fellow and I'm as fond of him as if he'd been my own son. And, and, I've been very uncomfortable about him lately. He has changed very much within the last few days and he has taken all sorts of absurd ideas into his head and my lady has alarmed me about him. She thinks...

LADY AUDLEY

It is better not to say too much about it as yet awhile. Alicia knows what I think.

ALICIA

Yes, my lady thinks that Bob is going mad, but I know better than that. He's not the sort of person to go mad. How should such a sluggish ditch-pond of an intellect as his ever work itself into a tempest? He may move about for the rest of his life, perhaps, in a tranquil state of semi-idiotcy imperfectly comprehending who he is and where he's going and what he's doing, but he'll never go mad.

SIR MICHAEL

He has managed to alarm and disturb both of you in different ways. I am surprised to tell the truth, given his heretofore lackadaisical attitude. I have always treated him like a son and still regard him as such.

LADY AUDLEY

How slow the time is on days like this. Shall I grow old like this, with every minute of my life seeing like an hour?

SIR MICHAEL

Poor little girl, my beloved daughter. Sir Harry Towers is stricken with despair at your rejection. He would give me half his estate, all his estate, twice his estate if he had it, to be loved by you. You are my daughter. You are pretty and pure and good and truthful. I want only for you to be happy. But you cling to this despairing notion about Bob, your cousin. Bob is hopeless. I regard him dearly, but he is utterly hopeless. And this recent matter with his friend Talboys, Good lord, it does seem as if he's gone mad.

LADY AUDLEY

Will you take a walk with me in the quadrangle, Alicia?

ALICIA

Yes, if you please, my lady. I have been listless all morning and shall be very glad of a little fresh air.

Audley Court. Exterior. ALICIA and LADY AUDLEY walk through the Lime-Tree Walk. Exterior. It's an unpleasant day.)

ALICIA

What a long day it has been already. Nothing but drizzle and mist and wind. Nobody will go out. It must needs be fine.

LADY AUDLEY

It is as if everyone is afraid to come out.

ALICIA

Perhaps in this wind I am catching cold. Consumption! Perhaps Robert might care for me if I had inflammation of the lungs.

LADY AUDLEY

Good gracious! Why on earth would you want such an indolent and peevish man to have the slightest feeling for you?

ALICIA

Because, unfortunately, despite his utter listlessness, I cannot get him out of my mind.

LADY AUDLEY

Robert Audley is a monomaniac. He is not worth a moment's consideration on your part.

ALICIA

Robert Audley is a close and dear cousin. He drives me mad. He puzzles his uncle. He is a barrister but has never practiced law. He has countless faults. But I have always loved him in a senseless way and would find myself devastated if anything harmful befell him.

LADY AUDLEY

Such a dreary day. How slow the time is, how slow! Shall I grow old like this, I wonder, with every minute of my life seeming like an hour?

ALICIA

Well, it is far too wet and windy for my taste. I must go in, my lady. Won't you come?

LADY AUDLEY

No, not yet. I would like to walk a bit further despite the weather.

(ALICIA EXITS. LADY AUDLEY lingers in the courtyard. After a long moment. ROBERT ENTERS.)

ROBERT

My lady.

(LADY AUDLEY staggers backwards and clings to the old wall for support. SHE stares at him. As HE approaches SHE sits disconsolately at the base of the wall.)

You are surprised!

(Pause)

Stand up and let me take you indoors.

(SHE is submissive and does not resist. HE assists her and takes her by the arm and THEY walk indoors.)

Audley Court. Interior. The drawing room. ROBERT and LADY AUDLEY ENTER. SHE sits near the fireplace. HE remains standing.

ROBERT

Lady Audley, I spoke to you last night very plainly, but you refused to listen to me. Tonight I must speak to you still more plainly and you must no longer refuse to listen to me.

(SHE utters a low, sobbing moan)

There was a fire last night at Mount Stanning. The Castle Inn was burned to the ground. Do you know how I escaped perishing in that destruction?

LADY AUDLEY

No.

ROBERT

I escaped by a most providential circumstance which seems a very simple one. I did not sleep in the room which had been prepared for me. The place seemed wretchedly damp and chilly, the chimney smoked abominably when an attempt was made at lighting a fire. I persuaded the boy I believe we've both met who works there to make me up a bed on the sofa in the small ground floor sitting room which I had occupied during the evening.

(Pause)

Shall I tell you by whose agency the destruction of the Castle Inn was brought about, my lady?

(Silence)

Shall I tell you?

(Silence still)

Lady Audley, you are the incendiary. It was you whose murderous hand kindled those flames. It was you who thought by that thrice-horrible deed to rid yourself of me, your enemy and denouncer. What was it to you that other lives might be sacrificed? You would have sacrificed an army of victims to rid yourself of me. So far as by sparing your shame I can spare others who must suffer by your shame, I will be merciful, but no further. If there were any secret tribunal before which you might be made to answer for your crimes, I would have little scruple in being your accuser, but I would spare that generous and high-born gentleman upon whose noble name your infamy would be reflected.

(HE is near to weeping, but recovers)

I slept lightly for my mind was troubled by this misery. It was I who discovered the breaking out of the fire in time to give the alarm and to save the boy and the poor drunken wretch, who was very much burnt in spite of efforts and who now lies in a precarious state at his mother's cottage. It was from him and from his wife that I learned who had visited the Castle Inn in the dead of the night. My path lies very straight before me. I have sworn to bring the murderer of George Talboys to justice and I will keep my oath. I look upon you as the demoniac incarnation of evil itself. You will confess all of this in the presence of the man you have cruelly deceived or I will bring

LADY AUDLEY

Bring Sir Michael! Bring him here and I will confess anything, everything. What do I care? God knows I have struggled hard enough against you. You have conquered. You have conquered a mad woman!

ROBERT

Mad? I hardly think so.

LADY AUDLEY

When you say that I killed George Talboys, you say the truth. When you say that I murdered him treacherously and foully, you lie. My mind sits narrowly on the wrong side of the line between sanity and insanity. When George Talboys reproached and threatened me, my mind lost its balance. Bring Sir Michael. If he is to be told one thing, let him be told everything. Let him hear the secret of my life.

(SIR MICHAEL ENTERS)

SIR MICHAEL

What is this all about? Robert, what have you done to my love?

ROBERT

Lady Audley has a confession to make to you, sire, a confession which will be a cruel surprise. May God soften this blow for you! I cannot.

SIR MICHAEL

Lucy! Tell me that this man is a madman! Tell me so, my love, or I shall kill him!

(LADY AUDLEY falls to her knees in front of SIR MICHAEL, just as she did when he first proposed. HE attempts to lift her but SHE resists and HE drops into a nearby chair.)

LADY AUDLEY

He has told you the truth and he is not mad. I should be sorry for you if I could, for you have been very, very good to me, much better than I ever deserved, but I can't. I can feel nothing but my own misery. I told you long ago that I was selfish. I am selfish still, more selfish than ever in my misery. Even as I do good works, I laugh at other people's sufferings. They seem so small compared to my own.

SIR MICHAEL

I have spent all my waking hours to have you avoid even the slightest misery.

LADY AUDLEY

(Shudders)

I've told you of my childhood poverty. I didn't tell you of my mother's madness and her mother's before that, an inheritance I have sought to keep hidden my entire life. As a girl, I was often told that I had beauty and that, as every school girl learns, my ultimate fate in life depended on using my beauty to marry well. I also didn't tell you that a wandering prince, as I fervently wished him to be, came to lift me out of my poor despair. His name was George Talboys.

SIR MICHAEL

The one who disappeared!

LADY AUDLEY

The one who died, but he did not lift me out. He proved incapable of finding employment. He deserted me and left me with a child and a hopeless father. His father was rich, his sister living in luxury and respectability, but they despised me. They considered me unworthy. My weak, tipsy father had more fear of me than love for me. In my son, I saw only his run-away father. It was then, my mind first lost its balance. The hereditary taint in my blood showed itself as I became subject to fits of violence and despair. For the first time, I crossed that invisible line between reason and madness.

(SIR MICHAEL, horrified, slumps back into his chair)

LADY AUDLEY

I determined to run away from this wretched home and go to London and lose myself in that great chaos of humanity. I responded to an advertisement and presented myself to Mrs. Vincent. Helen Talboys, born Helen Maldon, became Lucy Graham. She accepted me, waiving all questions as to my antecedents. You know the rest.

SIR MICHAEL

Lucy! Lucy! Lucy!

LADY AUDLEY

Three years had passed and I had received no token of my husband's existence. But a poor woman such as I has no rights in such a circumstance. None. I felt I had the right to think that he was dead or wished me to believe him dead. I believed this and gladly became your wife with every resolution to be as good a wife as it was in my nature to be. For the first time I took notice of the miseries of others. I took pleasure in acts of benevolence. I sent my father large sums of money anonymously, for I did not wish him to discover what had become of me. I regained my mental balance and was never so sane and in control of my impulses as then.

SIR MICHAEL

Did you not suspect the day of reckoning would finally come?

LADY AUDLEY

I had no such fear. I dispensed happiness on every side. I saw myself loved as well as admired and I think I might have been a good woman for the rest of my life if fate would have allowed me to be so. I believe that at this time my mind regained its just balance. But when, within a month of my marriage, an Essex newspaper printed a notice that a certain Mr. Talboys, a fortunate gold-seeker, was returning from Australia, I knew something had to be done. I knew that the man who had gone to the antipodes and won a fortune for his wife would leave no stone unturned in his efforts to find her.

SIR MICHAEL

You lost your balance once again.

LADY AUDLEY

I went down to Southampton and found my father, who was living there with my child. I confided to him the secret of my peril. We decided at once upon the first step. A notice of my death would be placed in *The Times*. The daughter of the poor woman he employed to care for my son was in fact near a consumptive death. It took only a modest sum to gain her participation. Within a fortnight her daughter died and was interred in Ventnor as Helen Talboys.

(SIR MICHAEL rises slowly, stiffly, as if every physical sense had been benumbed by his misery. HE and ROBERT move to the adjoining room.)

SIR MICHAEL

If there is anything more to be told I cannot bear to hear it. Robert, will you take upon yourself the duty of providing for the safety and comfort of this lady I once thought to be my wife? In all you do, remember I have loved her dearly. I cannot say farewell to her, nor can I stay another night in this house. I will go to London on the night train.

ROBERT

I will ask Alicia to accompany you.

SIR MICHAEL

If you must.

ROBERT

She will insist.

Audley Court. The next day. Interior. The drawing room. ROBERT sits opposite DR. MOSGRAVE.

ROBERT

Thank you for coming all the way from London on such short notice. You have been highly recommended. You are perhaps wondering if I am the patient.

DR. MOSGRAVE

Is it not about our own health that you wish to consult me?

ROBERT

No! I seek your advice in a most difficult case. The revelation made by a patient to the physician is, I believe, as sacred as the confession of a penitent to his priest?

DR. MOSGRAVE

Quite as sacred.

ROBERT

A solemn confidence to be violated under no circumstance?

DR. MOSGRAVE

Most certainly.

ROBERT

I have been given to understand, Dr. Mosgrave, that you have devoted much of your attention to the treatment of insanity and madness.

DR. MOSGRAVE

Yes, my practice is almost confined to the treatment of mental diseases.

ROBERT

The story that I am about to tell you is not my own story. You will forgive me, therefore, if I once more remind you that I can only reveal it upon the understanding that under no circumstances is that confidence to be betrayed.

DR. MOSGRAVE

I am all attention, Mr. Audley.

(As ROBERT begins his story, crossfade to LADY AUDLEY alone in her chambers, modeling her most expensive garments. Crossfade back to ROBERT and DR. MOSGRAVE.)

You have nothing further to tell me.

ROBERT

I do not think there is anything more that need be told.

DR. MOSGRAVE

You would wish me to prove this lady is mad and therefore irresponsible for her actions, Mr. Audley?

ROBERT

Yes. I should be glad to find that excuse for her.

DR. MOSGRAVE

To save the scandal of a Chancery suit, I suppose.

ROBERT

Indeed!

DR. MOSGRAVE

I fear that I shall not be any use to you. I will see the lady, if you please, but I do not believe that she is mad.

ROBERT

Why not?

DR. MOSGRAVE

Because there is no evidence of insanity in anything she has done. She ran away from her home because her home was not a pleasant one and she left in the hope of finding a better life. There is no madness in that. She committed the crime of bigamy, because by that crime she obtained fortune and position. There is no madness there. When she found herself in a desperate position, she employed intelligent means and carried out an intricate conspiracy. There is no madness in that.

ROBERT

But she asserts her own madness.

DR. MOSGRAVE

Not a single jury in England would accept the plea of insanity in such a case as this. The best you can do with this lady is to send her back to her first husband, if he will have her.

ROBERT

(Pause. Embarrassed)

Her first husband is presumed to be dead.

DR. MOSGRAVE

Dead or missing? Mr. Audley, there must be no half-confidences between us. You have not told me all. You have only told me half this lady's story. You must tell me more before I can offer you any advice. What has become of the first husband?

ROBERT

I have already told you, Dr. Mosgrave, I do not know.

DR. MOSGRAVE

My strong sense is that you have withheld things. I want to know the circumstances of the first husband's disappearance.

ROBERT

I will trust you, Dr. Mosgrave. I will confide entirely in your honor and goodness. I do not ask you to do any wrong to society, but I ask you to save our family name from degradation and shame, if you can do so conscientiously. Lady Audley has confessed to being the agent of her first husband's death but she claims insanity.

(DR. MOSGRAVE rises. Looks at his watch)

DR. MOSGRAVE

I can spare you fifteen minutes. I will see the lady.

(DR. MOSGRAVE EXITS. Crossfade to LUKE, lying in bed in his mother's cottage in agony. DR. DAWSON and PHOEBE attend. Crossfade back to ROBERT. DR. MOSGROVE RE-ENTERS, carrying a letter. HE paces as HE talks))

I have talked to the lady. I understand her very well. There is a latent insanity, insanity which might never appear, or which might appear only once or twice in a lifetime. The lady is not insane, but she has the potential of insanity and some hereditary taint. I will tell you what she is, Mr. Audley. She is dangerous. I can see the possibility of scandal. This Mr. George Talboys has disappeared, but you have no evidence of his death. She had a powerful motive for getting rid of him, but no jury in the United Kingdom would condemn her based solely on the motive or circumstantial evidence.

ROBERT

Sir, my great fear is the potential of disgrace and dishonor to the greatest aristocrat in all of Essex.

DR. MOSGRAVE

(Hands the letter to Robert)

I suppose, Mr. Audley, you are fortunate. I could not assist you were there any evidence she committed this murder. Indeed there is no evidence that he has died. Beleaguered souls confess to acts all the time, often falsely. I will do my best to help you. I have written this letter to my good friend Monsieur Val, the proprietor and medical superintendent of a very excellent *maison de santé* in Villebrumeuse, Belgium. We have known each other many years. With this referral, he will receive Lady Audley into his fine institution and assume full responsibility for her affairs for the rest of her life. I suggest you transport her at once before any new evidence makes itself known. From the moment in which Lady Audley enters that institution, her life, so far as life is made up of action and variety, will be finished. Whatever secrets she holds will be secrets forever. If you were to bury her alive in the nearest churchyard, you could not more safely shut her from all worldly associations. Good day to you, Mr. Audley.

(HE EXITS)

The Belgian asylum, as we first saw it. Two days later. ROBERT and LADY AUDLEY ENTER. SHE is covered by the desperation and isolation of the INMATES and their surroundings.

LADY AUDLEY

Now I see where you have brought me. This is a mad house.

(MONSIEUR VAL ENTERS. ROBERT gives him MOSGRAVE's letter.)

MONSIEUR VAL

Madame must be fatigued. Your journey has been a long one.

LADY AUDLEY

Do you think I am a baby that you may juggle with and deceive me? What is this place?

MONSIEUR VAL

A maison de santé, my lady. I have no wish to juggle with or to deceive you.

LADY AUDLEY

A maison de santé. How rich, a home for health! The Belgians have their enigmas. In England we would call it a madhouse!

MONSIEUR VAL

We think of it as a home for our patients.

ROBERT

Your new name will be Madame Taylor. I did not think you would wish to be known by your real name.

(LADY AUDLEY shakes her head in disbelief)

MONSIEUR VAL

We have been advised that money is of little concern. Madame will have an attendant entirely devoted to her service. She will have all her wishes obeyed, her reasonable wishes, but that goes without saying. You may rely upon our utmost efforts being exerted to insure your comfort.

LADY AUDLEY

Leave me alone with the man who brought me here! Leave me!

(MONSIEUR VAL bows and EXITS)

LADY AUDLEY

You have used your power basely and cruelly and have brought me to a living grave.

ROBERT

I have done that which I thought just to the family and merciful to you. I should have been a traitor to society had I suffered you to remain at liberty after the disappearance of George Talboys and the fire at Castle Inn. You will finally live a peaceful life, my lady. Surely, it is a small atonement which I ask you to render for your sins, a light penance in the end. Live here and repent. Nobody will torment you. I only say to you, repent!

LADY AUDLEY

I cannot! I cannot! Has my beauty brought me to this? Have I plotted and schemed to shield myself and laid awake in the long deadly nights, trembling to think of my dangers, for this? Would that I'd embraced the squalor of my poverty than arrive at this healthy hell. Would that I had yielded to the curse that was upon me and given up when George Talboys first came back to England.

ROBERT

Placing you here is most appropriate. You asserted your own madness when it suited you.

LADY AUDLEY

George Talboys was standing as close to me as you are now, leaning upon the windlass of the old well, in the shrubbery beyond the lime-walk. He was wild with anger and reproach and threatened to expose me. He goaded me as you have goaded me. He was merciless as you have been merciless. I offered to bribe him, to cajole him, to do anything he wanted. He would not listen. I was about to leave him when he caught me by the wrist and detained me with brute force. Fearing for my life, I pulled the loose iron spindle from the shrunken wood and saw my first husband sink with a horrible cry into the black mouth of the well. It is deep, they say. It is certainly dry, for I heard no splash, only a dull thud. I looked down and saw nothing but black emptiness. I waited for nearly a quarter of an hour. There was not another sound.

ROBERT

At last, the ghastly truth of it!

(Silence)

He loved you.

LADY AUDLEY

He abandoned me and our child! But, it is done. I have confessed. Your intent has not been to show me mercy. No, Mr. Audley, it has been to suit your purposes, to remove me from England and the reach of law. You sought only to prevent me from a suitable defense in a court of law and to save our family's precious reputation. To achieve all this you have for all intent buried me alive. And now that you know the truth, I trust you are prepared to let your miserable friend's body lie permanently at the bottom of that useless well so that no one will ever know the length to which you have gone to cover up my pitiful attempts at self-defense.

ROBERT

May God have mercy on your soul!

LADY AUDLEY

Who's God? Yours or mine? The God of the aristocracy or the God of the desperate poor. Tell me you are right and I am wrong. You are just as cunning and deceitful as I. You have circumvented the law to suit your purpose.

ROBERT

Madame Taylor. Which ever God you are inclined to worship, may he be with you. I will take my leave now.

(We see PHOEBE. SHE reads her letter.)

Dear Mr. Audley. My husband is not expected to live many days. I attend him constantly. He has expressed an earnest desire that you should to see you. Pray, come without delay. Yours, very respectfully, Phoebe Marks, Audley, Essex, March 6.

A cottage in the village of Audley. Internal. The next day. A small room. ROBERT ENTERS. LUKE MARKS lies in bed propped up by pillows. PHOEBE sits at the foot of the bed, clearly anxious at the impending death. LUKE will have difficulty breathing as he speaks.

LUKE

(To PHOEBE in a husky and feeble voice)

I don't want you. You've no call to hear what I've got to say. I only want Mr. Audley and I wants to speak to him all alone.

(HE points to the door.)

PHOEBE

I've no wish to hear anything, Luke, but I hope you won't say anything against those that have been good and generous to you.

LUKE

I shall say what I like and I'm not a-goin' to be ordered by you.

(PHOEBE EXITS)

I had no call to be grateful to you, not before the fire at the Castle t'other night. I'm not grateful to folks in a general way, perhaps, because the things as gentlefolks have give have a'most allus been the very things I didn't want. But when a gentleman goes and puts his own life in danger to save a drunken brute like me, I feels grateful and wishes to say before I die...which I sees in the doctor's face... 'Thank ye, sir. I'm obliged to you.

ROBERT

I need no thanks, Luke Marks. I was very glad to do what I did.

LUKE

You was oncommon fond of that gent as disappeared at the Court, warn't you, sir?

ROBERT

He was my very dear friend.

LUKE

I've heered the landlord of the Sun Inn say how cut up you was when you first missed him. I've heered the servants at the Court say you took on when you couldn't find him.

ROBERT

Pray do not speak any more of this subject. I cannot tell you how much it distresses me. You can tell me nothing I do not already know.

LUKE

You think I can't tell you nothin' you don't know?

ROBERT

Nothing.

LUKE

But suppose I feel I can't die with a secret on my mind? I'd have never told the lady. Never! I had my power over her and I kept it. I had her secret and was paid for it though with all her abuse to me, I paid her out twenty times over!

ROBERT

Luke Marks, for Heavens sake, be calm. What are you talking of? What is it that you could have told?

LUKE

I'm a-goin to tell you. Get down that tin box on the shelf over against the chest of drawers, will you?

(ROBERT obeys and after fumbling among broken teacups and milk-jugs, lidless wooden cotton boxes and a litter of rags and crockery, produces a tin snuffbox with a sliding lid. LUKE takes out two folded papers and gives them to ROBERT.)

ROBERT

I don't know this writing. What has this to do with my friend?

LUKE

Suppose you read 'em first and ask me questions about 'em afterwards.

(We see GEORGE TALBOYS, his arm in a cast.)

GEORGE

My dear friend, I write to you in such utter confusion of mind as perhaps no man ever before suffered. I can only tell you that something has happened which will drive me from England a broken-hearted man, to seek some corner of the earth in which I may live and die unknown and forgotten. If your friendship could have done me any good, I would have appealed to it. God bless you for the past, but you best forget me in the future. G.T.

(ROBERT unfolds the second letter)

Helen, may God pity and forgive you for that which you have done today, as truly as I do. Rest in peace. You shall never hear of me again. To you and to the world I shall henceforth be that which you wished me to be today. You need fear no molestation from me. I leave England never to return. G.T.

ROBERT

George Talboys did not write these.

LUKE

Every line. But it was his left hand. He couldn't use his right because of his broken arm.

ROBERT

My God! George Talboys is alive! Tell me all. Tell me how my poor friend was saved.

LUKE

I was at work up at Atkinson's farm last September, helping to stack the last of the corn. The nighest way from the farm to mother's cottage was through the meadows at the back of the Court. This one night, I heard a sound that made my blood creep, a groan of a man in pain lyin' somewhere hid among the bushes. I searched among the bushes. I found a man lyin' hidden under a lot o' laurels. Long tale short, I took him here for helpin'.

ROBERT

Where is he now?

LUKE

With the surgeon's help we fixed 'em up, casted his arm and cleaned him. He insisted he'd go to Liverpool and sail off to Australia. He'd no' listen to reason. He asked a pencil and wrote these notes with his left hand, not his usual.

ROBERT

Poor George! Poor George!

LUKE

I went straight to the Sun Inn, but you'd gone back to London and there was no forwarding address. I went to Court. That's when Phoebe told me she'd seen it all, what with Lady Audley and the Talboys man at the well. Phoebe told me the lady was now in her power and she'd do anythin' in the world for us if we keep her secret.

(Painful breath)

So you see both my Lady Audley and Phoebe thought as the gentleman was lying dead at the bottom of the well. If I was to give the letter they'd find out the contrary of this. Phoebe and me would lose the chance of getting' started in life by her missus.

ROBERT

Lady Audley has left Audley Court

LUKE

Never to come back, sir?

ROBERT

Never to come back.

LUKE

Indeed! Will you tell her he wasn't murdered? She's not a murderer.

ROBERT

(Silence)

No.

LUKE lays back exhausted. ROBERT rests a hand on him. The Belgian asylum. 1861. MADAME TAYLOR and MONSIEUR VAL.

MADAME

Who has not been or is not to be mad in some lonely hour of life? Who is quite safe from the trembling of the balance? To want or to be driven to want. That is the real question! Is an evil deed possible without some latent derangement or delusion? Are evil and delusion not interwoven? What evil murderer has not been delusional? What delusional creature has ever stayed balanced? I took different names but they were inextricable with who I am. Repent, you say. Repent who I am? I can no more repent than you can excuse.

INMATES

(Whispers, then a rising crescendo)

Murderer! Murderer! MURDERER! MURDERER! MURDERER!

(We hear Mozart's Requiem in D Minor, K. 626, Introitus.)

Audley Court. Exterior. The Courtyard. Later in 1861. It has fallen into disrepair. ROBERT AUDLEY, CLARA TALBOYS, ALICIA AUDLEY, PHOEBE MARKS, HARCOURT TALBOYS, GEORGE TALBOYS and GEORGEY, now 8, are examining the crumbling masonry and overgrown landscape. ROBERT and CLARA are holding hands.

GEORGEY

This is where mummy lived, father?

GEORGE

Yes, Georgey, she kept it up much better than this. She kept it fit for kings and queens.

CLARA

Indeed! Lady Audley loved Audley Court.

ALICE

I am terribly saddened to see it like this. I have lived most of my life in this estate.

PHOEBE

Will Sir Michael never come back to Audley Court?

ALICE

He won't mention its name. It is too painful for him. He has purchased a small house at Hertfordshire and intends to spend the rest of his years there.

CLARA

Will Audley Court just rot away like an abandoned mineshaft?

ALICE

Sir Michael is attempting to sell it. It's been shown to several wealthy prospects but the amount of repair to be done is a significant deterrent.

ROBERT

The work that is needed is clearly extensive.

GEORGE

I feel responsible for the whole sorry mess.

ALICE

George! How can you possibly say that?

GEORGE

It was my Helen that did this, caused the pain and dissolution. If I hadn't gone to Australia so sudden, well who knows...

ROBERT

George, guilt is a dangerous master. Do not take it on too easily.

GEORGE

One action leads to others in ways we cannot foresee. I have heard it called the law of unintended consequences.

ALICE

George Talboys, I have a thought! I'm sure father would be fine with it.

PHOEBE

What's your thought, my lady?

ALICE

George you and Georgey might live here and bring it back to a decent state. Father will have a much easier time in selling it once it's been rehabilitated.

ROBERT

Alice, that is an excellent idea. George, you're just the man to handle it.

PHOEBE

Mr. Talboys, you might need a housekeeper to assist you and help care for little Georgey. And Luke will help fix it up, if you're open to it.

GEORGE

I certainly would be grateful, both to Sir Michael and to you, Phoebe. I'd be quite open to having Luke here, particularly if he'd help me repair that pitiful well that I fell into.

GEORGEY

We will live here, father?

GEORGE

Yes, son. That way I can finally repair some of the mess I've made.

(GEORGEY runs to the pond.)

GEORGEY

Father, there's fish in the pond! I want to go fishing!

CLARA

It's a real surprise that they've been able to survive the dissolution.

ROBERT

(Putting his arm around CLARA)

It's a real surprise any of us has been able to survive the dissolution.

HARCOURT

I know what I will do. I will buy Audley Court! George, it is the least I could do after all my years of forbearance. I will work it all out with Sir Michael and relieve him of this burden and you and Georgey shall have a new start. Mind you, I won't have you shirking your duty to repair it fully. After all, it will become Talboys Court now.

(THEY are all dumbfounded, most of all GEORGE)

GEORGE

Father, that's far too much to ask, much too generous. Please reconsider. Georgey and I will be fine in Southampton.

HARCOURT

I will not have you living in that beastly cottage a day more than necessary. Son, you should know by now that when I make up my mind about something, it's not to be changed.

GEORGE

I suppose. Well then, thank you, father. I assure you I shall be most diligent in bringing Talboys Court back to life. And Georgey will become a first rate fisherman.

CLARA

(Beaming)

You see, George, your unintended consequences fostered very good things happen as well. Talboys Court! I like the sound of it. You also know that Robert would never have become my husband but for your running off to Australia. We will always of necessity be grateful to you for giving us the need to work together to find you and send you the news.

GEORGE

I suppose there's truth in that, with the two of you conspiring together to get to the bottom of the deception and then to find me to inform me.

ROBERT

I will always be grateful to you, George Talboys, although you might have introduced us proper before you disappeared. Things might have moved along more quickly if you had the foresight to do that.

CLARA

Alicia, your cousin has also seen fit to forsake his lazy ways. The barrister has a full case load now.

PHOEBE

I may be alone in saying this but I'll always have a warm place in my heart for your former wife, Mr. Talboys. Lady Audley was a kind mistress to me. I hope that is not painful to your feelings, sir.

GEORGE

I loved her too, Mrs. Marks, despite all that she did.

ALICE

George Talboys, she tried to murder you!

GEORGE

Yes, but she was out of her wits. I provoked her impulses by threatening to reveal the truth to Sir Michael. In my hotheadedness, I scratched her up a bit. A bit of it was self-defending on her part, I'm sure.

ALICE

Still!

HARCOURT

We cannot forget her wantonness. She was a bigamist and attempted murderer. I will always think of her as evil for her lies and her malicious deeds. It is not for me to blame you, Mr. Audley, for having smuggled that guilty woman out of the reach of justice, and thus, paltered with the laws of the country. I can only remark that, had the lady fallen into my hands she would have been very differently treated.

GEORGEY

(Returning to his father's side)

Father, is mum in heaven now?

GEORGE

If she is, Georgey, she likely gained entrance with an assumed name.

Audley Court. Exterior. The Courtyard. A year later, 1862. GEORGEY, now 9 years old, is by the fish pond, trying to catch a fish with his bare hands. GEORGE TALBOYS ENTERS from the mansion and calls to his son.

GEORGE

Georgey!

GEORGEY

Yes, Father.

GEORGE

What are you doing over there?

GEORGEY

Trying to catch a fish.

GEORGEY

With your bare hands? For heaven's sake, I would think it would be pointless.

GEORGEY

It's more fun than fishing with a rod. They are swimming all around, father. It is a good deal of fun.

GEORGE

It is turning cold. You should put on a sweater or a coat.

GEORGEY

I am not at all cold, father.

GEORGE

Well, do be careful. Do not fall into the pond.

GEORGEY

I will be careful. I have no intention of falling in with the fish.

(GEORGE EXITS into the mansion. GEORGEY resumes trying his efforts at the fishpond. After a minute the LADY in the black robe and hood ENTERS. We cannot see her face. GEORGEY looks up, curious. HE can see her.)

LADY

I know your name is Georgey.

GEORGEY

Yes, my lady.

LADY

Young man, how you've grown. How old are you now?

GEORGEY

I am nine years old.

LADY

You do take after your father.

GEORGEY

Yes, my lady.

LADY

I'm not scaring you, am I?

GEORGEY

No, my lady.

LADY

You live here now?

GEORGEY

Yes, we moved here when father came home from abroad.

LADY

Your father! He's alive? He lived abroad?

GEORGEY

Yes, ma'am. He lived abroad for a long time.

LADY

I did not know that!

GEORGEY

Luke and Phoebe live with us and work here.

LADY

Luke Marks! I am most surprised. I was never informed. You must be very happy.

GEORGEY

Yes, my lady. I am very glad, indeed. I go to school in Audley now. Would you like it if I went and fetched my father? Would you care to talk with him?

LADY

No, Georgey, I'd very much rather you did not fetch him. And your grandfather? Where does he live?

GEORGEY

Which one, my lady?

LADY

Yes, of course. Lieutenant Maldon. You used to live with him.

GEORGEY

He's in heaven now my lady. He took sick and died.

(SHE shudders, but regains composure quickly.)

LADY

Oh! I am most sorry indeed to hear that. Audley Court appears to be in excellent condition.

GEORGEY

It was once called Audley Court but no longer. My other grandpa' purchased it for father and me. It is called Talboys Court now.

LADY

Mr. Harcourt Talboys.

GEORGEY

Yes, ma'am. He is my grandfather.

LADY

And the people who used to live here, where are they now?

GEORGEY

I suppose I don't really know, my lady. I'd be sure father does. Are you certain you do not want to ask him?

LADY

I'd much prefer not to.

GEORGEY

My lady, who are you?

LADY

I'm afraid that is a secret.

GEORGEY

Why?

LADY

Young man, it is quite a complicated story. I'll ask you this. Do you remember lady who once visited with you back when you were a small boy? She gave you a gold watch.

GEORGEY

The pretty lady! Quite! I would think I will never forget her. She was very nice to me.

LADY

I hope you remember me with fondness as well. Will you try and do that?

GEORGEY

Yes. I will, my lady.

LADY

I must go now. Suppose you and I keep this little visit a secret. Would you do that, Georgey?

GEORGEY

I suppose, my lady.

LADY

Perhaps we shall see each other again in the future. In the meantime, I will be your secret. Everyone should have a secret, wouldn't you think?

GEORGEY

Yes, my lady. Holding on to a secret is a good deal fun. I have a very big secret I haven't told anyone. Would you like to hear it?

LADY

I would like that very much.

GEORGEY

There is a girl in my school that I have decided I am going to marry. She has said she would if I ask her proper when we both grow up. We have to wait until we get older.

LADY

And what is her name, Georgey?

GEORGEY

Helen, my lady. Someday she will be Mrs. Helen Talboys. And we will live here with father. There are many rooms. I have not told father. I think he would just laugh at me.

LADY

She will be Lady Talboys, then. That's wonderful, Georgey. I am very happy for you. May I make a suggestion?

GEORGEY

Yes.

LADY

Do not marry your Helen for her prettiness. Marry her because you truly love her and she truly loves you. There is no greater sin than to marry someone whom you do not truly love.

GEORGEY

But she *is* very pretty.

LADY

Indeed, I am sure she is that, but remember what I have told you.

GEORGEY

I wish you would tell me your secret, my lady.

LADY

In the future, Georgey. When you are older. I will return and we will share all our secrets with each other. By then, I am sure you will have several more. I promise.

GEORGEY

Thank you, my lady.

LADY

Goodbye, Georgey. Remember now, mum is the word for both of us.

GEORGEY

Yes, my lady. Mum is the word. I shall never forget.

(SHE EXITS. GEORGEY resumes trying to catch a fish with his bare hands.)

DARK. END OF PLAY

