



THE WOMAN
IN WHITE
WILKIE COLLINS



EPOCH TWO

The Story Continued by Marian Halcombe, Part VIII

June 19th.—I had only got as far as the top of the stairs when the locking of Laura's door suggested to me the precaution of also locking my own door, and keeping the key safely about me while I was out of the room. My journal was already secured with other papers in the table drawer, but my writing materials were left out. These included a seal bearing the common device of two doves drinking out of the same cup, and some sheets of blotting-paper, which had the impression on them of the closing lines of my writing in these pages traced during the past night. Distorted by the suspicion which had now become a part of myself, even such trifles as these looked too dangerous to be trusted without a guard—even the locked table drawer seemed to be not sufficiently protected in my absence until the means of access to it had been carefully secured as well.

I found no appearance of any one having entered the room while I had been talking with Laura. My writing materials (which I had given the servant instructions never to meddle with) were scattered over the table much as usual. The only circumstance in connection with them that at all struck me was that the seal lay tidily in the tray with the pencils and the wax. It was not in my careless habits (I am sorry to say) to put it there, neither did I remember putting it there. But as I could not call to mind, on the other hand, where else I had thrown it down, and as I was also doubtful whether I might not for once have laid it mechanically in the right place, I abstained from adding to the perplexity with which the day's events had filled my mind by troubling it afresh about a trifle. I locked the door, put the key in my pocket, and went downstairs.

Madame Fosco was alone in the hall looking at the weather-glass.

"Still falling," she said. "I am afraid we must expect more rain."

Her face was composed again to its customary expression and its customary colour. But the hand with which she pointed to the dial of the weather-glass still trembled.

Could she have told her husband already that she had overheard Laura reviling him, in my company, as a "spy?" My strong suspicion that she must have told him,



my irresistible dread (all the more overpowering from its very vagueness) of the consequences which might follow, my fixed conviction, derived from various little self-betrayals which women notice in each other, that Madame Fosco, in spite of her well-assumed external civility, had not forgiven her niece for innocently standing between her and the legacy of ten thousand pounds—all rushed upon my mind together, all impelled me to speak in the vain hope of using my own influence and my own powers of persuasion for the atonement of Laura's offence.

“May I trust to your kindness to excuse me, Madame Fosco, if I venture to speak to you on an exceedingly painful subject?”

She crossed her hands in front of her and bowed her head solemnly, without uttering a word, and without taking her eyes off mine for a moment.

“When you were so good as to bring me back my handkerchief,” I went on, “I am very, very much afraid you must have accidentally heard Laura say something which I am unwilling to repeat, and which I will not attempt to defend. I will only venture to hope that you have not thought it of sufficient importance to be mentioned to the Count?”

“I think it of no importance whatever,” said Madame Fosco sharply and suddenly. “But,” she added, resuming her icy manner in a moment, “I have no secrets from my husband even in trifles. When he noticed just now that I looked distressed, it was my painful duty to tell him why I was distressed, and I frankly acknowledge to you, Miss Halcombe, that I HAVE told him.”

I was prepared to hear it, and yet she turned me cold all over when she said those words.

“Let me earnestly entreat you, Madame Fosco—let me earnestly entreat the Count—to make some allowances for the sad position in which my sister is placed. She spoke while she was smarting under the insult and injustice inflicted on her by her husband, and she was not herself when she said those rash words. May I hope that they will be considerately and generously forgiven?”

“Most assuredly,” said the Count's quiet voice behind me. He had stolen on us with his noiseless tread and his book in his hand from the library.

“When Lady Glyde said those hasty words,” he went on, “she did me an injustice which I lament—and forgive. Let us never return to the subject, Miss Halcombe; let us all comfortably combine to forget it from this moment.”

“You are very kind,” I said, “you relieve me inexpressibly ”



I tried to continue, but his eyes were on me; his deadly smile that hides everything was set, hard, and unwavering on his broad, smooth face. My distrust of his unfathomable falseness, my sense of my own degradation in stooping to conciliate his wife and himself, so disturbed and confused me, that the next words failed on my lips, and I stood there in silence.

“I beg you on my knees to say no more, Miss Halcombe—I am truly shocked that you should have thought it necessary to say so much.” With that polite speech he took my hand—oh, how I despise myself! oh, how little comfort there is even in knowing that I submitted to it for Laura’s sake!—he took my hand and put it to his poisonous lips. Never did I know all my horror of him till then. That innocent familiarity turned my blood as if it had been the vilest insult that a man could offer me. Yet I hid my disgust from him—I tried to smile—I, who once mercilessly despised deceit in other women, was as false as the worst of them, as false as the Judas whose lips had touched my hand.

I could not have maintained my degrading self-control—it is all that redeems me in my own estimation to know that I could not—if he had still continued to keep his eyes on my face. His wife’s tigerish jealousy came to my rescue and forced his attention away from me the moment he possessed himself of my hand. Her cold blue eyes caught light, her dull white cheeks flushed into bright colour, she looked years younger than her age in an instant.

“Count!” she said. “Your foreign forms of politeness are not understood by Englishwomen.”

“Pardon me, my angel! The best and dearest Englishwoman in the world understands them.” With those words he dropped my hand and quietly raised his wife’s hand to his lips in place of it.

I ran back up the stairs to take refuge in my own room. If there had been time to think, my thoughts, when I was alone again, would have caused me bitter suffering. But there was no time to think. Happily for the preservation of my calmness and my courage there was time for nothing but action.

The letters to the lawyer and to Mr. Fairlie were still to be written, and I sat down at once without a moment’s hesitation to devote myself to them.

There was no multitude of resources to perplex me—there was absolutely no one to depend on, in the first instance, but myself. Sir Percival had neither friends nor relatives in the neighbourhood whose intercession I could attempt to employ. He was on the coldest terms—in some cases on the worst terms with the families of his own

rank and station who lived near him. We two women had neither father nor brother to come to the house and take our parts. There was no choice but to write those two doubtful letters, or to put Laura in the wrong and myself in the wrong, and to make all peaceable negotiation in the future impossible by secretly escaping from Blackwater Park. Nothing but the most imminent personal peril could justify our taking that second course. The letters must be tried first, and I wrote them.

I said nothing to the lawyer about Anne Catherick, because (as I had already hinted to Laura) that topic was connected with a mystery which we could not yet explain, and which it would therefore be useless to write about to a professional man. I left my correspondent to attribute Sir Percival's disgraceful conduct, if he pleased, to fresh disputes about money matters, and simply consulted him on the possibility of taking legal proceedings for Laura's protection in the event of her husband's refusal to allow her to leave Blackwater Park for a time and return with me to Limmeridge. I referred him to Mr. Fairlie for the details of this last arrangement—I assured him that I wrote with Laura's authority—and I ended by entreating him to act in her name to the utmost extent of his power and with the least possible loss of time.

The letter to Mr. Fairlie occupied me next. I appealed to him on the terms which I had mentioned to Laura as the most likely to make him bestir himself; I enclosed a copy of my letter to the lawyer to show him how serious the case was, and I represented our removal to Limmeridge as the only compromise which would prevent the danger and distress of Laura's present position from inevitably affecting her uncle as well as herself at no very distant time.

When I had done, and had sealed and directed the two envelopes, I went back with the letters to Laura's room, to show her that they were written.

"Has anybody disturbed you?" I asked, when she opened the door to me.

"Nobody has knocked," she replied. "But I heard some one in the outer room."

"Was it a man or a woman?"

"A woman. I heard the rustling of her gown."

"A rustling like silk?"

"Yes, like silk."

Madame Fosco had evidently been watching outside. The mischief she might do by herself was little to be feared. But the mischief she might do, as a willing instrument in her husband's hands, was too formidable to be overlooked.

"What became of the rustling of the gown when you no longer heard it in the ante-room?" I inquired. "Did you hear it go past your wall, along the passage?"



“Yes. I kept still and listened, and just heard it.”

“Which way did it go?”

“Towards your room.”

I considered again. The sound had not caught my ears. But I was then deeply absorbed in my letters, and I write with a heavy hand and a quill pen, scraping and scratching noisily over the paper. It was more likely that Madame Fosco would hear the scraping of my pen than that I should hear the rustling of her dress. Another reason (if I had wanted one) for not trusting my letters to the post-bag in the hall.

Laura saw me thinking. “More difficulties!” she said wearily; “more difficulties and more dangers!”

“No dangers,” I replied. “Some little difficulty, perhaps. I am thinking of the safest way of putting my two letters into Fanny’s hands.”

“You have really written them, then? Oh, Marian, run no risks— pray, pray run no risks!”

“No, no—no fear. Let me see—what o’clock is it now?”

It was a quarter to six. There would be time for me to get to the village inn, and to come back again before dinner. If I waited till the evening I might find no second opportunity of safely leaving the house.

“Keep the key turned in the lock. Laura,” I said, “and don’t be afraid about me. If you hear any inquiries made, call through the door, and say that I am gone out for a walk.”

“When shall you be back?”

“Before dinner, without fail. Courage, my love. By this time to-morrow you will have a clear-headed, trustworthy man acting for your good. Mr. Gilmore’s partner is our next best friend to Mr. Gilmore himself.”

A moment’s reflection, as soon as I was alone, convinced me that I had better not appear in my walking-dress until I had first discovered what was going on in the lower part of the house. I had not ascertained yet whether Sir Percival was indoors or out.

The singing of the canaries in the library, and the smell of tobacco-smoke that came through the door, which was not closed, told me at once where the Count was. I looked over my shoulder as I passed the doorway, and saw to my surprise that he was exhibiting the docility of the birds in his most engagingly polite manner to the housekeeper. He must have specially invited her to see them—for she would never have thought of going into the library of her own accord. The man’s slightest actions

had a purpose of some kind at the bottom of every one of them. What could be his purpose here?

It was no time then to inquire into his motives. I looked about for Madame Fosco next, and found her following her favourite circle round and round the fish-pond.

I was a little doubtful how she would meet me, after the outbreak of jealousy of which I had been the cause so short a time since. But her husband had tamed her in the interval, and she now spoke to me with the same civility as usual. My only object in addressing myself to her was to ascertain if she knew what had become of Sir Percival. I contrived to refer to him indirectly, and after a little fencing on either side she at last mentioned that he had gone out.

“Which of the horses has he taken?” I asked carelessly.

“None of them,” she replied. “He went away two hours since on foot. As I understood it, his object was to make fresh inquiries about the woman named Anne Catherick. He appears to be unreasonably anxious about tracing her. Do you happen to know if she is dangerously mad, Miss Halcombe?”

“I do not, Countess.”

“Are you going in?”

“Yes, I think so. I suppose it will soon be time to dress for dinner.”

We entered the house together. Madame Fosco strolled into the library, and closed the door. I went at once to fetch my hat and shawl. Every moment was of importance, if I was to get to Fanny at the inn and be back before dinner.

When I crossed the hall again no one was there, and the singing of the birds in the library had ceased. I could not stop to make any fresh investigations. I could only assure myself that the way was clear, and then leave the house with the two letters safe in my pocket.

On my way to the village I prepared myself for the possibility of meeting Sir Percival. As long as I had him to deal with alone I felt certain of not losing my presence of mind. Any woman who is sure of her own wits is a match at any time for a man who is not sure of his own temper. I had no such fear of Sir Percival as I had of the Count. Instead of fluttering, it had composed me, to hear of the errand on which he had gone out. While the tracing of Anne Catherick was the great anxiety that occupied him, Laura and I might hope for some cessation of any active persecution at his hands. For our sakes now, as well as for Anne’s, I hoped and prayed fervently that she might still escape him.

I walked on as briskly as the heat would let me till I reached the cross-road which led to the village, looking back from time to time to make sure that I was not followed by any one.

Nothing was behind me all the way but an empty country waggon. The noise made by the lumbering wheels annoyed me, and when I found that the waggon took the road to the village, as well as myself, I stopped to let it go by and pass out of hearing. As I looked toward it, more attentively than before, I thought I detected at intervals the feet of a man walking close behind it, the carter being in front, by the side of his horses. The part of the cross-road which I had just passed over was so narrow that the waggon coming after me brushed the trees and thickets on either side, and I had to wait until it went by before I could test the correctness of my impression. Apparently that impression was wrong, for when the waggon had passed me the road behind it was quite clear.

I reached the inn without meeting Sir Percival, and without noticing anything more, and was glad to find that the landlady had received Fanny with all possible kindness. The girl had a little parlour to sit in, away from the noise of the taproom, and a clean bedchamber at the top of the house. She began crying again at the sight of me, and said, poor soul, truly enough, that it was dreadful to feel herself turned out into the world as if she had committed some unpardonable fault, when no blame could be laid at her door by anybody—not even by her master, who had sent her away.

“Try to make the best of it, Fanny,” I said. “Your mistress and I will stand your friends, and will take care that your character shall not suffer. Now, listen to me. I have very little time to spare, and I am going to put a great trust in your hands. I wish you to take care of these two letters. The one with the stamp on it you are to put into the post when you reach London to-morrow. The other, directed to Mr. Fairlie, you are to deliver to him yourself as soon as you get home. Keep both the letters about you and give them up to no one. They are of the last importance to your mistress’s interests.”

Fanny put the letters into the bosom of her dress. “There they shall stop, miss,” she said, “till I have done what you tell me.”

“Mind you are at the station in good time to-morrow morning,” I continued. “And when you see the housekeeper at Limmeridge give her my compliments, and say that you are in my service until Lady Glyde is able to take you back. We may meet again sooner than you think. So keep a good heart, and don’t miss the seven o’clock train.”

“Thank you, miss—thank you kindly. It gives one courage to hear your voice again. Please to offer my duty to my lady, and say I left all the things as tidy as I could

in the time. Oh, dear! dear! who will dress her for dinner to-day? It really breaks my heart, miss, to think of it.”

When I got back to the house I had only a quarter of an hour to spare to put myself in order for dinner, and to say two words to Laura before I went downstairs.

“The letters are in Fanny’s hands,” I whispered to her at the door. “Do you mean to join us at dinner?”

“Oh, no, no—not for the world.”

“Has anything happened? Has any one disturbed you?”

“Yes—just now—Sir Percival——”

“Did he come in?”

“No, he frightened me by a thump on the door outside. I said, ‘Who’s there?’ ‘You know,’ he answered. ‘Will you alter your mind, and tell me the rest? You shall! Sooner or later I’ll wring it out of you. You know where Anne Catherick is at this moment.’ ‘Indeed, indeed,’ I said, ‘I don’t.’ ‘You do!’ he called back. ‘I’ll crush your obstinacy—mind that!—I’ll wring it out of you!’ He went away with those words—went away, Marian, hardly five minutes ago.”

He had not found Anne! We were safe for that night—he had not found her yet.

“You are going downstairs, Marian? Come up again in the evening.”

“Yes, yes. Don’t be uneasy if I am a little late—I must be careful not to give offence by leaving them too soon.”

The dinner-bell rang and I hastened away.

Sir Percival took Madame Fosco into the dining-room, and the Count gave me his arm. He was hot and flushed, and was not dressed with his customary care and completeness. Had he, too, been out before dinner, and been late in getting back? or was he only suffering from the heat a little more severely than usual?

However this might be, he was unquestionably troubled by some secret annoyance or anxiety, which, with all his powers of deception, he was not able entirely to conceal. Through the whole of dinner he was almost as silent as Sir Percival himself, and he, every now and then, looked at his wife with an expression of furtive uneasiness which was quite new in my experience of him. The one social obligation which he seemed to be self-possessed enough to perform as carefully as ever was the obligation of being persistently civil and attentive to me. What vile object he has in view I cannot still discover, but be the design what it may, invariable politeness towards myself, invariable humility towards Laura, and invariable suppression (at any cost) of Sir Percival’s clumsy violence, have been the means he has resolutely and impenetrably

used to get to his end ever since he set foot in this house. I suspected it when he first interfered in our favour, on the day when the deed was produced in the library, and I feel certain of it now.

When Madame Fosco and I rose to leave the table, the Count rose also to accompany us back to the drawing-room.

“What are you going away for?” asked Sir Percival—“I mean YOU, Fosco.”

“I am going away because I have had dinner enough, and wine enough,” answered the Count. “Be so kind, Percival, as to make allowances for my foreign habit of going out with the ladies, as well as coming in with them.”

“Nonsense! Another glass of claret won’t hurt you. Sit down again like an Englishman. I want half an hour’s quiet talk with you over our wine.”

“A quiet talk, Percival, with all my heart, but not now, and not over the wine. Later in the evening, if you please—later in the evening.”

“Civil!” said Sir Percival savagely. “Civil behaviour, upon my soul, to a man in his own house!”

I had more than once seen him look at the Count uneasily during dinner-time, and had observed that the Count carefully abstained from looking at him in return. This circumstance, coupled with the host’s anxiety for a little quiet talk over the wine, and the guest’s obstinate resolution not to sit down again at the table, revived in my memory the request which Sir Percival had vainly addressed to his friend earlier in the day to come out of the library and speak to him. The Count had deferred granting that private interview, when it was first asked for in the afternoon, and had again deferred granting it, when it was a second time asked for at the dinner-table. Whatever the coming subject of discussion between them might be, it was clearly an important subject in Sir Percival’s estimation—and perhaps (judging from his evident reluctance to approach it) a dangerous subject as well, in the estimation of the Count.

These considerations occurred to me while we were passing from the dining-room to the drawing-room. Sir Percival’s angry commentary on his friend’s desertion of him had not produced the slightest effect. The Count obstinately accompanied us to the tea-table—waited a minute or two in the room—went out into the hall—and returned with the post-bag in his hands. It was then eight o’clock—the hour at which the letters were always despatched from Blackwater Park.

“Have you any letter for the post, Miss Halcombe?” he asked, approaching me with the bag.

I saw Madame Fosco, who was making the tea, pause, with the sugar-tongs in her hand, to listen for my answer.

“No, Count, thank you. No letters to-day.”

He gave the bag to the servant, who was then in the room; sat down at the piano, and played the air of the lively Neapolitan street-song, “La mia Carolina,” twice over. His wife, who was usually the most deliberate of women in all her movements, made the tea as quickly as I could have made it myself—finished her own cup in two minutes, and quietly glided out of the room.

I rose to follow her example—partly because I suspected her of attempting some treachery upstairs with Laura, partly because I was resolved not to remain alone in the same room with her husband.

Before I could get to the door the Count stopped me, by a request for a cup of tea. I gave him the cup of tea, and tried a second time to get away. He stopped me again—this time by going back to the piano, and suddenly appealing to me on a musical question in which he declared that the honour of his country was concerned.

I vainly pleaded my own total ignorance of music, and total want of taste in that direction. He only appealed to me again with a vehemence which set all further protest on my part at defiance. “The English and the Germans (he indignantly declared) were always reviling the Italians for their inability to cultivate the higher kinds of music. We were perpetually talking of our Oratorios, and they were perpetually talking of their Symphonies. Did we forget and did they forget his immortal friend and countryman, Rossini? What was Moses in Egypt but a sublime oratorio, which was acted on the stage instead of being coldly sung in a concert-room? What was the overture to Guillaume Tell but a symphony under another name? Had I heard Moses in Egypt? Would I listen to this, and this, and this, and say if anything more sublimely sacred and grand had ever been composed by mortal man?”—And without waiting for a word of assent or dissent on my part, looking me hard in the face all the time, he began thundering on the piano, and singing to it with loud and lofty enthusiasm—only interrupting himself, at intervals, to announce to me fiercely the titles of the different pieces of music: “Chorus of Egyptians in the Plague of Darkness, Miss Halcombe!”—“Recitativo of Moses with the tables of the Law.”—“Prayer of Israelites, at the passage of the Red Sea. Aha! Aha! Is that sacred? is that sublime?” The piano trembled under his powerful hands, and the teacups on the table rattled, as his big bass voice thundered out the notes, and his heavy foot beat time on the floor.

There was something horrible—something fierce and devilish—in the outburst of his delight at his own singing and playing, and in the triumph with which he watched its effect upon me as I shrank nearer and nearer to the door. I was released at last, not by my own efforts, but by Sir Percival's interposition. He opened the dining-room door, and called out angrily to know what "that infernal noise" meant. The Count instantly got up from the piano. "Ah! if Percival is coming," he said, "harmony and melody are both at an end. The Muse of Music, Miss Halcombe, deserts us in dismay, and I, the fat old minstrel, exhale the rest of my enthusiasm in the open air!" He stalked out into the verandah, put his hands in his pockets, and resumed the Recitativo of Moses, *sotto voce*, in the garden.

I heard Sir Percival call after him from the dining-room window. But he took no notice—he seemed determined not to hear. That long-deferred quiet talk between them was still to be put off, was still to wait for the Count's absolute will and pleasure.

He had detained me in the drawing-room nearly half an hour from the time when his wife left us. Where had she been, and what had she been doing in that interval?

I went upstairs to ascertain, but I made no discoveries, and when I questioned Laura, I found that she had not heard anything. Nobody had disturbed her, no faint rustling of the silk dress had been audible, either in the ante-room or in the passage.

It was then twenty minutes to nine. After going to my room to get my journal, I returned, and sat with Laura, sometimes writing, sometimes stopping to talk with her. Nobody came near us, and nothing happened. We remained together till ten o'clock. I then rose, said my last cheering words, and wished her good-night. She locked her door again after we had arranged that I should come in and see her the first thing in the morning.

I had a few sentences more to add to my diary before going to bed myself, and as I went down again to the drawing-room after leaving Laura for the last time that weary day, I resolved merely to show myself there, to make my excuses, and then to retire an hour earlier than usual for the night.

Sir Percival, and the Count and his wife, were sitting together. Sir Percival was yawning in an easy-chair, the Count was reading, Madame Fosco was fanning herself. Strange to say, HER face was flushed now. She, who never suffered from the heat, was most undoubtedly suffering from it to-night.

"I am afraid, Countess, you are not quite so well as usual?" I said.

"The very remark I was about to make to you," she replied. "You are looking pale, my dear."

My dear! It was the first time she had ever addressed me with that familiarity! There was an insolent smile too on her face when she said the words.

“I am suffering from one of my bad headaches,” I answered coldly.

“Ah, indeed? Want of exercise, I suppose? A walk before dinner would have been just the thing for you.” She referred to the “walk” with a strange emphasis. Had she seen me go out? No matter if she had. The letters were safe now in Fanny’s hands.

“Come and have a smoke, Fosco,” said Sir Percival, rising, with another uneasy look at his friend.

“With pleasure, Percival, when the ladies have gone to bed,” replied the Count.

“Excuse me, Countess, if I set you the example of retiring,” I said. “The only remedy for such a headache as mine is going to bed.”

I took my leave. There was the same insolent smile on the woman’s face when I shook hands with her. Sir Percival paid no attention to me. He was looking impatiently at Madame Fosco, who showed no signs of leaving the room with me. The Count smiled to himself behind his book. There was yet another delay to that quiet talk with Sir Percival—and the Countess was the impediment this time.

