



THE WOMAN
IN WHITE
WILKIE COLLINS



EPOCH THREE

The Story Continued by Walter Hartright, Part II

It was between nine and ten o'clock before I reached Fulham, and found my way to Gower's Walk.

Both Laura and Marian came to the door to let me in. I think we had hardly known how close the tie was which bound us three together, until the evening came which united us again. We met as if we had been parted for months instead of for a few days only. Marian's face was sadly worn and anxious. I saw who had known all the danger and borne all the trouble in my absence the moment I looked at her. Laura's brighter looks and better spirits told me how carefully she had been spared all knowledge of the dreadful death at Welmingham, and of the true reason of our change of abode.

The stir of the removal seemed to have cheered and interested her. She only spoke of it as a happy thought of Marian's to surprise me on my return with a change from the close, noisy street to the pleasant neighbourhood of trees and fields and the river. She was full of projects for the future—of the drawings she was to finish—of the purchasers I had found in the country who were to buy them—of the shillings and sixpences she had saved, till her purse was so heavy that she proudly asked me to weigh it in my own hand. The change for the better which had been wrought in her during the few days of my absence was a surprise to me for which I was quite unprepared—and for all the unspeakable happiness of seeing it, I was indebted to Marian's courage and to Marian's love.

When Laura had left us, and when we could speak to one another without restraint, I tried to give some expression to the gratitude and the admiration which filled my heart. But the generous creature would not wait to hear me. That sublime self-forgetfulness of women, which yields so much and asks so little, turned all her thoughts from herself to me.

"I had only a moment left before post-time," she said, "or I should have written less abruptly. You look worn and weary, Walter. I am afraid my letter must have seriously alarmed you?"



“Only at first,” I replied. “My mind was quieted, Marian, by my trust in you. Was I right in attributing this sudden change of place to some threatened annoyance on the part of Count Fosco?”

“Perfectly right,” she said. “I saw him yesterday, and worse than that, Walter—I spoke to him.”

“Spoke to him? Did he know where we lived? Did he come to the house?”

“He did. To the house—but not upstairs. Laura never saw him— Laura suspects nothing. I will tell you how it happened: the danger, I believe and hope, is over now. Yesterday, I was in the sitting-room, at our old lodgings. Laura was drawing at the table, and I was walking about and setting things to rights. I passed the window, and as I passed it, looked out into the street. There, on the opposite side of the way, I saw the Count, with a man talking to him——”

“Did he notice you at the window?”

“No—at least, I thought not. I was too violently startled to be quite sure.”

“Who was the other man? A stranger?”

“Not a stranger, Walter. As soon as I could draw my breath again, I recognised him. He was the owner of the Lunatic Asylum.”

“Was the Count pointing out the house to him?”

“No, they were talking together as if they had accidentally met in the street. I remained at the window looking at them from behind the curtain. If I had turned round, and if Laura had seen my face at that moment——Thank God, she was absorbed over her drawing! They soon parted. The man from the Asylum went one way, and the Count the other. I began to hope they were in the street by chance, till I saw the Count come back, stop opposite to us again, take out his card-case and pencil, write something, and then cross the road to the shop below us. I ran past Laura before she could see me, and said I had forgotten something upstairs. As soon as I was out of the room I went down to the first landing and waited—I was determined to stop him if he tried to come upstairs. He made no such attempt. The girl from the shop came through the door into the passage, with his card in her hand—a large gilt card with his name, and a coronet above it, and these lines underneath in pencil: ‘Dear lady’ (yes! the villain could address me in that way still)—‘dear lady, one word, I implore you, on a matter serious to us both.’ If one can think at all, in serious difficulties, one thinks quick. I felt directly that it might be a fatal mistake to leave myself and to leave you in the dark, where such a man as the Count was concerned. I felt that the doubt of what he might do, in your absence, would be ten times more trying to me if I declined to see

him than if I consented. ‘Ask the gentleman to wait in the shop,’ I said. ‘I will be with him in a moment.’ I ran upstairs for my bonnet, being determined not to let him speak to me indoors. I knew his deep ringing voice, and I was afraid Laura might hear it, even in the shop. In less than a minute I was down again in the passage, and had opened the door into the street. He came round to meet me from the shop. There he was in deep mourning, with his smooth bow and his deadly smile, and some idle boys and women near him, staring at his great size, his fine black clothes, and his large cane with the gold knob to it. All the horrible time at Blackwater came back to me the moment I set eyes on him. All the old loathing crept and crawled through me, when he took off his hat with a flourish and spoke to me, as if we had parted on the friendliest terms hardly a day since.”

“You remember what he said?”

“I can’t repeat it, Walter. You shall know directly what he said about you—but I can’t repeat what he said to me. It was worse than the polite insolence of his letter. My hands tingled to strike him, as if I had been a man! I only kept them quiet by tearing his card to pieces under my shawl. Without saying a word on my side, I walked away from the house (for fear of Laura seeing us), and he followed, protesting softly all the way. In the first by-street I turned, and asked him what he wanted with me. He wanted two things. First, if I had no objection, to express his sentiments. I declined to hear them. Secondly, to repeat the warning in his letter. I asked, what occasion there was for repeating it. He bowed and smiled, and said he would explain. The explanation exactly confirmed the fears I expressed before you left us. I told you, if you remember, that Sir Percival would be too headstrong to take his friend’s advice where you were concerned, and that there was no danger to be dreaded from the Count till his own interests were threatened, and he was roused into acting for himself?”

“I recollect, Marian.”

“Well, so it has really turned out. The Count offered his advice, but it was refused. Sir Percival would only take counsel of his own violence, his own obstinacy, and his own hatred of you. The Count let him have his way, first privately ascertaining, in case of his own interests being threatened next, where we lived. You were followed, Walter, on returning here, after your first journey to Hampshire, by the lawyer’s men for some distance from the railway, and by the Count himself to the door of the house. How he contrived to escape being seen by you he did not tell me, but he found us out on that occasion, and in that way. Having made the discovery, he took no advantage of it till the news reached him of Sir Percival’s death, and then, as I told you, he acted for

himself, because he believed you would next proceed against the dead man's partner in the conspiracy. He at once made his arrangements to meet the owner of the Asylum in London, and to take him to the place where his runaway patient was hidden, believing that the results, whichever way they ended, would be to involve you in interminable legal disputes and difficulties, and to tie your hands for all purposes of offence, so far as he was concerned. That was his purpose, on his own confession to me. The only consideration which made him hesitate, at the last moment——”

“Yes?”

“It is hard to acknowledge it, Walter, and yet I must. I was the only consideration. No words can say how degraded I feel in my own estimation when I think of it, but the one weak point in that man's iron character is the horrible admiration he feels for me. I have tried, for the sake of my own self-respect, to disbelieve it as long as I could; but his looks, his actions, force on me the shameful conviction of the truth. The eyes of that monster of wickedness moistened while he was speaking to me—they did, Walter! He declared that at the moment of pointing out the house to the doctor, he thought of my misery if I was separated from Laura, of my responsibility if I was called on to answer for effecting her escape, and he risked the worst that you could do to him, the second time, for my sake. All he asked was that I would remember the sacrifice, and restrain your rashness, in my own interests—interests which he might never be able to consult again. I made no such bargain with him—I would have died first. But believe him or not, whether it is true or false that he sent the doctor away with an excuse, one thing is certain, I saw the man leave him without so much as a glance at our window, or even at our side of the way.”

“I believe it, Marian. The best men are not consistent in good— why should the worst men be consistent in evil? At the same time, I suspect him of merely attempting to frighten you, by threatening what he cannot really do. I doubt his power of annoying us, by means of the owner of the Asylum, now that Sir Percival is dead, and Mrs. Catherick is free from all control. But let me hear more. What did the Count say of me?”

“He spoke last of you. His eyes brightened and hardened, and his manner changed to what I remember it in past times—to that mixture of pitiless resolution and mountebank mockery which makes it so impossible to fathom him. ‘Warn Mr. Hartright!’ he said in his loftiest manner. ‘He has a man of brains to deal with, a man who snaps his big fingers at the laws and conventions of society, when he measures himself with ME. If my lamented friend had taken my advice, the business of the



inquest would have been with the body of Mr. Hartright. But my lamented friend was obstinate. See! I mourn his loss—inwardly in my soul, outwardly on my hat. This trivial crape expresses sensibilities which I summon Mr. Hartright to respect. They may be transformed to immeasurable enmities if he ventures to disturb them. Let him be content with what he has got—with what I leave unmolested, for your sake, to him and to you. Say to him (with my compliments), if he stirs me, he has Fosco to deal with. In the English of the Popular Tongue, I inform him—Fosco sticks at nothing. Dear lady, good morning.’ His cold grey eyes settled on my face—he took off his hat solemnly—bowed, bare-headed—and left me.”

“Without returning? without saying more last words?”

“He turned at the corner of the street, and waved his hand, and then struck it theatrically on his breast. I lost sight of him after that. He disappeared in the opposite direction to our house, and I ran back to Laura. Before I was indoors again, I had made up my mind that we must go. The house (especially in your absence) was a place of danger instead of a place of safety, now that the Count had discovered it. If I could have felt certain of your return, I should have risked waiting till you came back. But I was certain of nothing, and I acted at once on my own impulse. You had spoken, before leaving us, of moving into a quieter neighbourhood and purer air, for the sake of Laura’s health. I had only to remind her of that, and to suggest surprising you and saving you trouble by managing the move in your absence, to make her quite as anxious for the change as I was. She helped me to pack up your things, and she has arranged them all for you in your new working-room here.”

“What made you think of coming to this place?”

“My ignorance of other localities in the neighbourhood of London. I felt the necessity of getting as far away as possible from our old lodgings, and I knew something of Fulham, because I had once been at school there. I despatched a messenger with a note, on the chance that the school might still be in existence. It was in existence—the daughters of my old mistress were carrying it on for her, and they engaged this place from the instructions I had sent. It was just post-time when the messenger returned to me with the address of the house. We moved after dark—we came here quite unobserved. Have I done right, Walter? Have I justified your trust in me?”

I answered her warmly and gratefully, as I really felt. But the anxious look still remained on her face while I was speaking, and the first question she asked, when I had done, related to Count Fosco.



I saw that she was thinking of him now with a changed mind. No fresh outbreak of anger against him, no new appeal to me to hasten the day of reckoning escaped her. Her conviction that the man's hateful admiration of herself was really sincere, seemed to have increased a hundredfold her distrust of his unfathomable cunning, her inborn dread of the wicked energy and vigilance of all his faculties. Her voice fell low, her manner was hesitating, her eyes searched into mine with an eager fear when she asked me what I thought of his message, and what I meant to do next after hearing it.

"Not many weeks have passed, Marian," I answered, "since my interview with Mr. Kyrle. When he and I parted, the last words I said to him about Laura were these: 'Her uncle's house shall open to receive her, in the presence of every soul who followed the false funeral to the grave; the lie that records her death shall be publicly erased from the tombstone by the authority of the head of the family, and the two men who have wronged her shall answer for their crime to ME, though the justice that sits in tribunals is powerless to pursue them.' One of those men is beyond mortal reach. The other remains, and my resolution remains."

Her eyes lit up—her colour rose. She said nothing, but I saw all her sympathies gathering to mine in her face.

"I don't disguise from myself, or from you," I went on, "that the prospect before us is more than doubtful. The risks we have run already are, it may be, trifles compared with the risks that threaten us in the future, but the venture shall be tried, Marian, for all that. I am not rash enough to measure myself against such a man as the Count before I am well prepared for him. I have learnt patience—I can wait my time. Let him believe that his message has produced its effect—let him know nothing of us, and hear nothing of us—let us give him full time to feel secure—his own boastful nature, unless I seriously mistake him, will hasten that result. This is one reason for waiting, but there is another more important still. My position, Marian, towards you and towards Laura ought to be a stronger one than it is now before I try our last chance."

She leaned near to me, with a look of surprise.

"How can it be stronger?" she asked.

"I will tell you," I replied, "when the time comes. It has not come yet—it may never come at all. I may be silent about it to Laura for ever—I must be silent now, even to YOU, till I see for myself that I can harmlessly and honourably speak. Let us leave that subject. There is another which has more pressing claims on our attention. You have kept Laura, mercifully kept her, in ignorance of her husband's death——"

"Oh, Walter, surely it must be long yet before we tell her of it?"

“No, Marian. Better that you should reveal it to her now, than that accident, which no one can guard against, should reveal it to her at some future time. Spare her all the details—break it to her very tenderly, but tell her that he is dead.”

“You have a reason, Walter, for wishing her to know of her husband’s death besides the reason you have just mentioned?”

“I have.”

“A reason connected with that subject which must not be mentioned between us yet?—which may never be mentioned to Laura at all?”

She dwelt on the last words meaningly. When I answered her in the affirmative, I dwelt on them too.

Her face grew pale. For a while she looked at me with a sad, hesitating interest. An unaccustomed tenderness trembled in her dark eyes and softened her firm lips, as she glanced aside at the empty chair in which the dear companion of all our joys and sorrows had been sitting.

“I think I understand,” she said. “I think I owe it to her and to you, Walter, to tell her of her husband’s death.”

She sighed, and held my hand fast for a moment—then dropped it abruptly, and left the room. On the next day Laura knew that his death had released her, and that the error and the calamity of her life lay buried in his tomb.

His name was mentioned among us no more. Thenceforward, we shrank from the slightest approach to the subject of his death, and in the same scrupulous manner, Marian and I avoided all further reference to that other subject, which, by her consent and mine, was not to be mentioned between us yet. It was not the less present in our minds—it was rather kept alive in them by the restraint which we had imposed on ourselves. We both watched Laura more anxiously than ever, sometimes waiting and hoping, sometimes waiting and fearing, till the time came.

By degrees we returned to our accustomed way of life. I resumed the daily work, which had been suspended during my absence in Hampshire. Our new lodgings cost us more than the smaller and less convenient rooms which we had left, and the claim thus implied on my increased exertions was strengthened by the doubtfulness of our future prospects. Emergencies might yet happen which would exhaust our little fund at the banker’s, and the work of my hands might be, ultimately, all we had to look to for support. More permanent and more lucrative employment than had yet been offered to me was a necessity of our position—a necessity for which I now diligently set myself to provide.

It must not be supposed that the interval of rest and seclusion of which I am now writing, entirely suspended, on my part, all pursuit of the one absorbing purpose with which my thoughts and actions are associated in these pages. That purpose was, for months and months yet, never to relax its claims on me. The slow ripening of it still left me a measure of precaution to take, an obligation of gratitude to perform, and a doubtful question to solve.

The measure of precaution related, necessarily, to the Count. It was of the last importance to ascertain, if possible, whether his plans committed him to remaining in England—or, in other words, to remaining within my reach. I contrived to set this doubt at rest by very simple means. His address in St. John's Wood being known to me, I inquired in the neighbourhood, and having found out the agent who had the disposal of the furnished house in which he lived, I asked if number five, Forest Road, was likely to be let within a reasonable time. The reply was in the negative. I was informed that the foreign gentleman then residing in the house had renewed his term of occupation for another six months, and would remain in possession until the end of June in the following year. We were then at the beginning of December only. I left the agent with my mind relieved from all present fear of the Count's escaping me.

The obligation I had to perform took me once more into the presence of Mrs. Clements. I had promised to return, and to confide to her those particulars relating to the death and burial of Anne Catherick which I had been obliged to withhold at our first interview. Changed as circumstances now were, there was no hindrance to my trusting the good woman with as much of the story of the conspiracy as it was necessary to tell. I had every reason that sympathy and friendly feeling could suggest to urge on me the speedy performance of my promise, and I did conscientiously and carefully perform it. There is no need to burden these pages with any statement of what passed at the interview. It will be more to the purpose to say, that the interview itself necessarily brought to my mind the one doubtful question still remaining to be solved—the question of Anne Catherick's parentage on the father's side.

A multitude of small considerations in connection with this subject—trifling enough in themselves, but strikingly important when massed together—had latterly led my mind to a conclusion which I resolved to verify. I obtained Marian's permission to write to Major Donthorne, of Varneck Hall (where Mrs. Catherick had lived in service for some years previous to her marriage), to ask him certain questions. I made the inquiries in Marian's name, and described them as relating to matters of personal history in her family, which might explain and excuse my application. When I wrote the

letter I had no certain knowledge that Major Donthorne was still alive—I despatched it on the chance that he might be living, and able and willing to reply.

After a lapse of two days proof came, in the shape of a letter, that the Major was living, and that he was ready to help us.

The idea in my mind when I wrote to him, and the nature of my inquiries, will be easily inferred from his reply. His letter answered my questions by communicating these important facts—

In the first place, “the late Sir Percival Glyde, of Blackwater Park,” had never set foot in Varneck Hall. The deceased gentleman was a total stranger to Major Donthorne, and to all his family.

In the second place, “the late Mr. Philip Fairlie, of Limmeridge House,” had been, in his younger days, the intimate friend and constant guest of Major Donthorne. Having refreshed his memory by looking back to old letters and other papers, the Major was in a position to say positively that Mr. Philip Fairlie was staying at Varneck Hall in the month of August, eighteen hundred and twenty- six, and that he remained there for the shooting during the month of September and part of October following. He then left, to the best of the Major’s belief, for Scotland, and did not return to Varneck Hall till after a lapse of time, when he reappeared in the character of a newly-married man.

Taken by itself, this statement was, perhaps, of little positive value, but taken in connection with certain facts, every one of which either Marian or I knew to be true, it suggested one plain conclusion that was, to our minds, irresistible.

Knowing, now, that Mr. Philip Fairlie had been at Varneck Hall in the autumn of eighteen hundred and twenty-six, and that Mrs. Catherick had been living there in service at the same time, we knew also—first, that Anne had been born in June, eighteen hundred and twenty-seven; secondly, that she had always presented an extraordinary personal resemblance to Laura; and, thirdly, that Laura herself was strikingly like her father. Mr. Philip Fairlie had been one of the notoriously handsome men of his time. In disposition entirely unlike his brother Frederick, he was the spoilt darling of society, especially of the women—an easy, light-hearted, impulsive, affectionate man—generous to a fault— constitutionally lax in his principles, and notoriously thoughtless of moral obligations where women were concerned. Such were the facts we knew—such was the character of the man. Surely the plain inference that follows needs no pointing out?

Read by the new light which had now broken upon me, even Mrs. Catherick’s letter, in despite of herself, rendered its mite of assistance towards strengthening the

conclusion at which I had arrived. She had described Mrs. Fairlie (in writing to me) as “plain-looking,” and as having “entrapped the handsomest man in England into marrying her.” Both assertions were gratuitously made, and both were false. Jealous dislike (which, in such a woman as Mrs. Catherick, would express itself in petty malice rather than not express itself at all) appeared to me to be the only assignable cause for the peculiar insolence of her reference to Mrs. Fairlie, under circumstances which did not necessitate any reference at all.

The mention here of Mrs. Fairlie’s name naturally suggests one other question. Did she ever suspect whose child the little girl brought to her at Limmeridge might be?

Marian’s testimony was positive on this point. Mrs. Fairlie’s letter to her husband, which had been read to me in former days— the letter describing Anne’s resemblance to Laura, and acknowledging her affectionate interest in the little stranger— had been written, beyond all question, in perfect innocence of heart. It even seemed doubtful, on consideration, whether Mr. Philip Fairlie himself had been nearer than his wife to any suspicion of the truth. The disgracefully deceitful circumstances under which Mrs. Catherick had married, the purpose of concealment which the marriage was intended to answer, might well keep her silent for caution’s sake, perhaps for her own pride’s sake also, even assuming that she had the means, in his absence, of communicating with the father of her unborn child.

As this surmise floated through my mind, there rose on my memory the remembrance of the Scripture denunciation which we have all thought of in our time with wonder and with awe: “The sins of the fathers shall be visited on the children.” But for the fatal resemblance between the two daughters of one father, the conspiracy of which Anne had been the innocent instrument and Laura the innocent victim could never have been planned. With what unerring and terrible directness the long chain of circumstances led down from the thoughtless wrong committed by the father to the heartless injury inflicted on the child!

These thoughts came to me, and others with them, which drew my mind away to the little Cumberland churchyard where Anne Catherick now lay buried. I thought of the bygone days when I had met her by Mrs. Fairlie’s grave, and met her for the last time. I thought of her poor helpless hands beating on the tombstone, and her weary, yearning words, murmured to the dead remains of her protectress and her friend: “Oh, if I could die, and be hidden and at rest with YOU!” Little more than a year had passed since she breathed that wish; and how inscrutably, how awfully, it had been fulfilled! The words she had spoken to Laura by the shores of the lake, the very words had



now come true. “Oh, if I could only be buried with your mother! If I could only wake at her side when the angel’s trumpet sounds and the graves give up their dead at the resurrection!” Through what mortal crime and horror, through what darkest windings of the way down to death—the lost creature had wandered in God’s leading to the last home that, living, she never hoped to reach! In that sacred rest I leave her—in that dread companionship let her remain undisturbed.

So the ghostly figure which has haunted these pages, as it haunted my life, goes down into the impenetrable gloom. Like a shadow she first came to me in the loneliness of the night. Like a shadow she passes away in the loneliness of the dead.