



THE WOMAN
IN WHITE
WILKIE COLLINS



EPOCH ONE

The Story Begun by Walter Hartright, Part XI

Not a word more was said, on either side, as we walked back to the house. Miss Halcombe hastened immediately to her sister's room, and I withdrew to my studio to set in order all of Mr. Fairlie's drawings that I had not yet mounted and restored before I resigned them to the care of other hands. Thoughts that I had hitherto restrained, thoughts that made my position harder than ever to endure, crowded on me now that I was alone.

She was engaged to be married, and her future husband was Sir Percival Glyde. A man of the rank of Baronet, and the owner of property in Hampshire.

There were hundreds of baronets in England, and dozens of landowners in Hampshire. Judging by the ordinary rules of evidence, I had not the shadow of a reason, thus far, for connecting Sir Percival Glyde with the suspicious words of inquiry that had been spoken to me by the woman in white. And yet, I did connect him with them. Was it because he had now become associated in my mind with Miss Fairlie, Miss Fairlie being, in her turn, associated with Anne Catherick, since the night when I had discovered the ominous likeness between them? Had the events of the morning so unnerved me already that I was at the mercy of any delusion which common chances and common coincidences might suggest to my imagination? Impossible to say. I could only feel that what had passed between Miss Halcombe and myself, on our way from the summer-house, had affected me very strangely. The foreboding of some undiscoverable danger lying hid from us all in the darkness of the future was strong on me. The doubt whether I was not linked already to a chain of events which even my approaching departure from Cumberland would be powerless to snap asunder—the doubt whether we any of us saw the end as the end would really be—gathered more and more darkly over my mind. Poignant as it was, the sense of suffering caused by the miserable end of my brief, presumptuous love seemed to be blunted and deadened by the still stronger sense of something obscurely impending, something invisibly threatening, that Time was holding over our heads.



I had been engaged with the drawings little more than half an hour, when there was a knock at the door. It opened, on my answering; and, to my surprise, Miss Halcombe entered the room.

Her manner was angry and agitated. She caught up a chair for herself before I could give her one, and sat down in it, close at my side.

“Mr. Hartright,” she said, “I had hoped that all painful subjects of conversation were exhausted between us, for to-day at least. But it is not to be so. There is some underhand villainy at work to frighten my sister about her approaching marriage. You saw me send the gardener on to the house, with a letter addressed, in a strange handwriting, to Miss Fairlie?”

“Certainly.”

“The letter is an anonymous letter—a vile attempt to injure Sir Percival Glyde in my sister’s estimation. It has so agitated and alarmed her that I have had the greatest possible difficulty in composing her spirits sufficiently to allow me to leave her room and come here. I know this is a family matter on which I ought not to consult you, and in which you can feel no concern or interest——”

“I beg your pardon, Miss Halcombe. I feel the strongest possible concern and interest in anything that affects Miss Fairlie’s happiness or yours.”

“I am glad to hear you say so. You are the only person in the house, or out of it, who can advise me. Mr. Fairlie, in his state of health and with his horror of difficulties and mysteries of all kinds, is not to be thought of. The clergyman is a good, weak man, who knows nothing out of the routine of his duties; and our neighbours are just the sort of comfortable, jog-trot acquaintances whom one cannot disturb in times of trouble and danger. What I want to know is this: ought I at once to take such steps as I can to discover the writer of the letter? or ought I to wait, and apply to Mr. Fairlie’s legal adviser to-morrow? It is a question—perhaps a very important one—of gaining or losing a day. Tell me what you think, Mr. Hartright. If necessity had not already obliged me to take you into my confidence under very delicate circumstances, even my helpless situation would, perhaps, be no excuse for me. But as things are I cannot surely be wrong, after all that has passed between us, in forgetting that you are a friend of only three months’ standing.”

She gave me the letter. It began abruptly, without any preliminary form of address, as follows—

“Do you believe in dreams? I hope, for your own sake, that you do. See what Scripture says about dreams and their fulfilment (Genesis xl. 8, xli. 25; Daniel iv. 18-25), and take the warning I send you before it is too late.

“Last night I dreamed about you, Miss Fairlie. I dreamed that I was standing inside the communion rails of a church—I on one side of the altar-table, and the clergyman, with his surplice and his prayer-book, on the other.

“After a time there walked towards us, down the aisle of the church, a man and a woman, coming to be married. You were the woman. You looked so pretty and innocent in your beautiful white silk dress, and your long white lace veil, that my heart felt for you, and the tears came into my eyes.

“They were tears of pity, young lady, that heaven blesses and instead of falling from my eyes like the everyday tears that we all of us shed, they turned into two rays of light which slanted nearer and nearer to the man standing at the altar with you, till they touched his breast. The two rays sprang ill arches like two rainbows between me and him. I looked along them, and I saw down into his inmost heart.

“The outside of the man you were marrying was fair enough to see. He was neither tall nor short—he was a little below the middle size. A light, active, high-spirited man—about five-and-forty years old, to look at. He had a pale face, and was bald over the forehead, but had dark hair on the rest of his head. His beard was shaven on his chin, but was let to grow, of a fine rich brown, on his cheeks and his upper lip. His eyes were brown too, and very bright; his nose straight and handsome and delicate enough to have done for a woman’s. His hands the same. He was troubled from time to time with a dry hacking cough, and when he put up his white right hand to his mouth, he showed the red scar of an old wound across the back of it. Have I dreamt of the right man? You know best, Miss Fairlie and you can say if I was deceived or not. Read next, what I saw beneath the outside—I entreat you, read, and profit.

“I looked along the two rays of light, and I saw down into his inmost heart. It was black as night, and on it were written, in the red flaming letters which are the handwriting of the fallen angel, ‘Without pity and without remorse. He has strewn with misery the paths of others, and he will live to strew with misery the path of this woman by his side.’ I read that, and then the rays of light shifted and pointed over his shoulder; and there, behind him, stood a fiend laughing. And the rays of light shifted once more, and pointed over your shoulder; and there behind you, stood an angel weeping. And the rays of light shifted for the third time, and pointed straight between you and that man. They widened and widened, thrusting you both asunder, one from the other. And the clergyman looked for the marriage-service in vain: it was gone out of the book, and he shut up the leaves, and put it from him in despair. And I woke with my eyes full of tears and my heart beating—for I believe in dreams.

“Believe too, Miss Fairlie—I beg of you, for your own sake, believe as I do. Joseph and Daniel, and others in Scripture, believed in dreams. Inquire into the past life of that man with the scar on his hand, before you say the words that make you his miserable wife. I don’t give you this warning on my account, but on yours. I have an interest in your well-being that will live as long as I draw breath. Your mother’s daughter has a tender place in my heart—for your mother was my first, my best, my only friend.”

There the extraordinary letter ended, without signature of any sort.

The handwriting afforded no prospect of a clue. It was traced on ruled lines, in the cramped, conventional, copy-book character technically termed “small hand.” It was feeble and faint, and defaced by blots, but had otherwise nothing to distinguish it.

“That is not an illiterate letter,” said Miss Halcombe, “and at the same time, it is surely too incoherent to be the letter of an educated person in the higher ranks of life. The reference to the bridal dress and veil, and other little expressions, seem to point to it as the production of some woman. What do you think, Mr. Hartright?”

“I think so too. It seems to me to be not only the letter of a woman, but of a woman whose mind must be——”

“Deranged?” suggested Miss Halcombe. “It struck me in that light too.”

I did not answer. While I was speaking, my eyes rested on the last sentence of the letter: “Your mother’s daughter has a tender place in my heart—for your mother was my first, my best, my only friend.” Those words and the doubt which had just escaped me as to the sanity of the writer of the letter, acting together on my mind, suggested an idea, which I was literally afraid to express openly, or even to encourage secretly. I began to doubt whether my own faculties were not in danger of losing their balance. It seemed almost like a monomania to be tracing back everything strange that happened, everything unexpected that was said, always to the same hidden source and the same sinister influence. I resolved, this time, in defence of my own courage and my own sense, to come to no decision that plain fact did not warrant, and to turn my back resolutely on everything that tempted me in the shape of surmise.

“If we have any chance of tracing the person who has written this,” I said, returning the letter to Miss Halcombe, “there can be no harm in seizing our opportunity the moment it offers. I think we ought to speak to the gardener again about the elderly woman who gave him the letter, and then to continue our inquiries in the village. But first let me ask a question. You mentioned just now the alternative of consulting Mr. Fairlie’s legal adviser to-morrow. Is there no possibility of communicating with him earlier? Why not to-day?”



“I can only explain,” replied Miss Halcombe, “by entering into certain particulars, connected with my sister’s marriage- engagement, which I did not think it necessary or desirable to mention to you this morning. One of Sir Percival Glyde’s objects in coming here on Monday, is to fix the period of his marriage, which has hitherto been left quite unsettled. He is anxious that the event should take place before the end of the year.”

“Does Miss Fairlie know of that wish?” I asked eagerly.

“She has no suspicion of it, and after what has happened, I shall not take the responsibility upon myself of enlightening her. Sir Percival has only mentioned his views to Mr. Fairlie, who has told me himself that he is ready and anxious, as Laura’s guardian, to forward them. He has written to London, to the family solicitor, Mr. Gilmore. Mr. Gilmore happens to be away in Glasgow on business, and he has replied by proposing to stop at Limmeridge House on his way back to town. He will arrive to-morrow, and will stay with us a few days, so as to allow Sir Percival time to plead his own cause. If he succeeds, Mr. Gilmore will then return to London, taking with him his instructions for my sister’s marriage- settlement. You understand now, Mr. Hartright, why I speak of waiting to take legal advice until to-morrow? Mr. Gilmore is the old and tried friend of two generations of Fairlies, and we can trust him, as we could trust no one else.”

The marriage-settlement! The mere hearing of those two words stung me with a jealous despair that was poison to my higher and better instincts. I began to think—it is hard to confess this, but I must suppress nothing from beginning to end of the terrible story that I now stand committed to reveal—I began to think, with a hateful eagerness of hope, of the vague charges against Sir Percival Glyde which the anonymous letter contained. What if those wild accusations rested on a foundation of truth? What if their truth could be proved before the fatal words of consent were spoken, and the marriage-settlement was drawn? I have tried to think since, that the feeling which then animated me began and ended in pure devotion to Miss Fairlie’s interests, but I have never succeeded in deceiving myself into believing it, and I must not now attempt to deceive others. The feeling began and ended in reckless, vindictive, hopeless hatred of the man who was to marry her.

“If we are to find out anything,” I said, speaking under the new influence which was now directing me, “we had better not let another minute slip by us unemployed. I can only suggest, once more, the propriety of questioning the gardener a second time, and of inquiring in the village immediately afterwards.”

“I think I may be of help to you in both cases,” said Miss Halcombe, rising. “Let us go, Mr. Hartright, at once, and do the best we can together.”

I had the door in my hand to open it for her—but I stopped, on a sudden, to ask an important question before we set forth.

“One of the paragraphs of the anonymous letter,” I said, “contains some sentences of minute personal description. Sir Percival Glyde’s name is not mentioned, I know—but does that description at all resemble him?”

“Accurately—even in stating his age to be forty-five——”

Forty-five; and she was not yet twenty-one! Men of his age married wives of her age every day—and experience had shown those marriages to be often the happiest ones. I knew that—and yet even the mention of his age, when I contrasted it with hers, added to my blind hatred and distrust of him.

“Accurately,” Miss Halcombe continued, “even to the scar on his right hand, which is the scar of a wound that he received years since when he was travelling in Italy. There can be no doubt that every peculiarity of his personal appearance is thoroughly well known to the writer of the letter.”

“Even a cough that he is troubled with is mentioned, if I remember right?”

“Yes, and mentioned correctly. He treats it lightly himself, though it sometimes makes his friends anxious about him.”

“I suppose no whispers have ever been heard against his character?”

“Mr. Hartright! I hope you are not unjust enough to let that infamous letter influence you?”

I felt the blood rush into my cheeks, for I knew that it HAD influenced me.

“I hope not,” I answered confusedly. “Perhaps I had no right to ask the question.”

“I am not sorry you asked it,” she said, “for it enables me to do justice to Sir Percival’s reputation. Not a whisper, Mr. Hartright, has ever reached me, or my family, against him. He has fought successfully two contested elections, and has come out of the ordeal unscathed. A man who can do that, in England, is a man whose character is established.”

I opened the door for her in silence, and followed her out. She had not convinced me. If the recording angel had come down from heaven to confirm her, and had opened his book to my mortal eyes, the recording angel would not have convinced me.

We found the gardener at work as usual. No amount of questioning could extract a single answer of any importance from the lad’s impenetrable stupidity. The woman who had given him the letter was an elderly woman; she had not spoken a word to him, and she had gone away towards the south in a great hurry. That was all the gardener could tell us.

The village lay southward of the house. So to the village we went next.