



THE WOMAN
IN WHITE
WILKIE COLLINS



EPOCH ONE

The Story Begun by Walter Hartright, Part XV

As we walked round to the front of the house a fly from the railway approached us along the drive. Miss Halcombe waited on the door-steps until the fly drew up, and then advanced to shake hands with an old gentleman, who got out briskly the moment the steps were let down. Mr. Gilmore had arrived.

I looked at him, when we were introduced to each other, with an interest and a curiosity which I could hardly conceal. This old man was to remain at Limmeridge House after I had left it, he was to hear Sir Percival Glyde's explanation, and was to give Miss Halcombe the assistance of his experience in forming her judgment; he was to wait until the question of the marriage was set at rest; and his hand, if that question were decided in the affirmative, was to draw the settlement which bound Miss Fairlie irrevocably to her engagement. Even then, when I knew nothing by comparison with what I know now, I looked at the family lawyer with an interest which I had never felt before in the presence of any man breathing who was a total stranger to me.

In external appearance Mr. Gilmore was the exact opposite of the conventional idea of an old lawyer. His complexion was florid— his white hair was worn rather long and kept carefully brushed— his black coat, waistcoat, and trousers fitted him with perfect neatness—his white cravat was carefully tied, and his lavender- coloured kid gloves might have adorned the hands of a fashionable clergyman, without fear and without reproach. His manners were pleasantly marked by the formal grace and refinement of the old school of politeness, quickened by the invigorating sharpness and readiness of a man whose business in life obliges him always to keep his faculties in good working order. A sanguine constitution and fair prospects to begin with—a long subsequent career of creditable and comfortable prosperity—a cheerful, diligent, widely-respected old age—such were the general impressions I derived from my introduction to Mr. Gilmore, and it is but fair to him to add, that the knowledge I gained by later and better experience only tended to confirm them.



I left the old gentleman and Miss Halcombe to enter the house together, and to talk of family matters undisturbed by the restraint of a stranger's presence. They crossed the hall on their way to the drawing-room, and I descended the steps again to wander about the garden alone.

My hours were numbered at Limmeridge House—my departure the next morning was irrevocably settled—my share in the investigation which the anonymous letter had rendered necessary was at an end. No harm could be done to any one but myself if I let my heart loose again, for the little time that was left me, from the cold cruelty of restraint which necessity had forced me to inflict upon it, and took my farewell of the scenes which were associated with the brief dream-time of my happiness and my love.

I turned instinctively to the walk beneath my study-window, where I had seen her the evening before with her little dog, and followed the path which her dear feet had trodden so often, till I came to the wicket gate that led into her rose garden. The winter bareness spread drearily over it now. The flowers that she had taught me to distinguish by their names, the flowers that I had taught her to paint from, were gone, and the tiny white paths that led between the beds were damp and green already. I went on to the avenue of trees, where we had breathed together the warm fragrance of August evenings, where we had admired together the myriad combinations of shade and sunlight that dappled the ground at our feet. The leaves fell about me from the groaning branches, and the earthy decay in the atmosphere chilled me to the bones. A little farther on, and I was out of the grounds, and following the lane that wound gently upward to the nearest hills. The old felled tree by the wayside, on which we had sat to rest, was sodden with rain, and the tuft of ferns and grasses which I had drawn for her, nestling under the rough stone wall in front of us, had turned to a pool of water, stagnating round an island of draggled weeds. I gained the summit of the hill, and looked at the view which we had so often admired in the happier time. It was cold and barren—it was no longer the view that I remembered. The sunshine of her presence was far from me—the charm of her voice no longer murmured in my ear. She had talked to me, on the spot from which I now looked down, of her father, who was her last surviving parent—had told me how fond of each other they had been, and how sadly she missed him still when she entered certain rooms in the house, and when she took up forgotten occupations and amusements with which he had been associated. Was the view that I had seen, while listening to those words, the view that I saw now, standing on the hill-top by myself? I turned and left it—I wound my way back again, over the moor, and round the sandhills, down to the beach. There was the white rage of the surf,

and the multitudinous glory of the leaping waves—but where was the place on which she had once drawn idle figures with her parasol in the sand—the place where we had sat together, while she talked to me about myself and my home, while she asked me a woman’s minutely observant questions about my mother and my sister, and innocently wondered whether I should ever leave my lonely chambers and have a wife and a house of my own? Wind and wave had long since smoothed out the trace of her which she had left in those marks on the sand, I looked over the wide monotony of the seaside prospect, and the place in which we two had idled away the sunny hours was as lost to me as if I had never known it, as strange to me as if I stood already on a foreign shore.

The empty silence of the beach struck cold to my heart. I returned to the house and the garden, where traces were left to speak of her at every turn.

On the west terrace walk I met Mr. Gilmore. He was evidently in search of me, for he quickened his pace when we caught sight of each other. The state of my spirits little fitted me for the society of a stranger; but the meeting was inevitable, and I resigned myself to make the best of it.

“You are the very person I wanted to see,” said the old gentleman. “I had two words to say to you, my dear sir; and if you have no objection I will avail myself of the present opportunity. To put it plainly, Miss Halcombe and I have been talking over family affairs—affairs which are the cause of my being here—and in the course of our conversation she was naturally led to tell me of this unpleasant matter connected with the anonymous letter, and of the share which you have most creditably and properly taken in the proceedings so far. That share, I quite understand, gives you an interest which you might not otherwise have felt, in knowing that the future management of the investigation which you have begun will be placed in safe hands. My dear sir, make yourself quite easy on that point—it will be placed in MY hands.”

“You are, in every way, Mr. Gilmore, much fitter to advise and to act in the matter than I am. Is it an indiscretion on my part to ask if you have decided yet on a course of proceeding?”

“So far as it is possible to decide, Mr. Hartright, I have decided. I mean to send a copy of the letter, accompanied by a statement of the circumstances, to Sir Percival Glyde’s solicitor in London, with whom I have some acquaintance. The letter itself I shall keep here to show to Sir Percival as soon as he arrives. The tracing of the two women I have already provided for, by sending one of Mr. Fairlie’s servants—a confidential person—to the station to make inquiries. The man has his money and his directions, and he will follow the women in the event of his finding any clue.

This is all that can be done until Sir Percival comes on Monday. I have no doubt myself that every explanation which can be expected from a gentleman and a man of honour, he will readily give. Sir Percival stands very high, sir—an eminent position, a reputation above suspicion—I feel quite easy about results—quite easy, I am rejoiced to assure you. Things of this sort happen constantly in my experience. Anonymous letters—unfortunate woman—sad state of society. I don't deny that there are peculiar complications in this case; but the case itself is, most unhappily, common—common.”

“I am afraid, Mr. Gilmore, I have the misfortune to differ from you in the view I take of the case.”

“Just so, my dear sir—just so. I am an old man, and I take the practical view. You are a young man, and you take the romantic view. Let us not dispute about our views. I live professionally in an atmosphere of disputation, Mr. Hartright, and I am only too glad to escape from it, as I am escaping here. We will wait for events—yes, yes, yes—we will wait for events. Charming place this. Good shooting? Probably not, none of Mr. Fairlie's land is preserved, I think. Charming place, though, and delightful people. You draw and paint, I hear, Mr. Hartright? Envious accomplishment. What style?”

We dropped into general conversation, or rather, Mr. Gilmore talked and I listened. My attention was far from him, and from the topics on which he discoursed so fluently. The solitary walk of the last two hours had wrought its effect on me—it had set the idea in my mind of hastening my departure from Limmeridge House. Why should I prolong the hard trial of saying farewell by one unnecessary minute? What further service was required of me by any one? There was no useful purpose to be served by my stay in Cumberland—there was no restriction of time in the permission to leave which my employer had granted to me. Why not end it there and then?

I determined to end it. There were some hours of daylight still left—there was no reason why my journey back to London should not begin on that afternoon. I made the first civil excuse that occurred to me for leaving Mr. Gilmore, and returned at once to the house.

On my way up to my own room I met Miss Halcombe on the stairs. She saw, by the hurry of my movements and the change in my manner, that I had some new purpose in view, and asked what had happened.

I told her the reasons which induced me to think of hastening my departure, exactly as I have told them here.

“No, no,” she said, earnestly and kindly, “leave us like a friend—break bread with us once more. Stay here and dine, stay here and help us to spend our last evening with

you as happily, as like our first evenings, as we can. It is my invitation—Mrs. Vesey’s invitation——” she hesitated a little, and then added, “Laura’s invitation as well.”

I promised to remain. God knows I had no wish to leave even the shadow of a sorrowful impression with any one of them.

My own room was the best place for me till the dinner bell rang. I waited there till it was time to go downstairs.

I had not spoken to Miss Fairlie—I had not even seen her—all that day. The first meeting with her, when I entered the drawing-room, was a hard trial to her self-control and to mine. She, too, had done her best to make our last evening renew the golden bygone time—the time that could never come again. She had put on the dress which I used to admire more than any other that she possessed—a dark blue silk, trimmed quaintly and prettily with old-fashioned lace; she came forward to meet me with her former readiness—she gave me her hand with the frank, innocent good-will of happier days. The cold fingers that trembled round mine—the pale cheeks with a bright red spot burning in the midst of them—the faint smile that struggled to live on her lips and died away from them while I looked at it, told me at what sacrifice of herself her outward composure was maintained. My heart could take her no closer to me, or I should have loved her then as I had never loved her yet.

Mr. Gilmore was a great assistance to us. He was in high good-humour, and he led the conversation with unflagging spirit. Miss Halcombe seconded him resolutely, and I did all I could to follow her example. The kind blue eyes, whose slightest changes of expression I had learnt to interpret so well, looked at me appealingly when we first sat down to table. Help my sister—the sweet anxious face seemed to say—help my sister, and you will help me.

We got through the dinner, to all outward appearance at least, happily enough. When the ladies had risen from table, and Mr. Gilmore and I were left alone in the dining-room, a new interest presented itself to occupy our attention, and to give me an opportunity of quieting myself by a few minutes of needful and welcome silence. The servant who had been despatched to trace Anne Catherick and Mrs. Clements returned with his report, and was shown into the dining-room immediately.

“Well,” said Mr. Gilmore, “what have you found out?”

“I have found out, sir,” answered the man, “that both the women took tickets at our station here for Carlisle.”

“You went to Carlisle, of course, when you heard that?”

“I did, sir, but I am sorry to say I could find no further trace of them.”



“You inquired at the railway?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And at the different inns?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you left the statement I wrote for you at the police station?”

“I did, sir.”

“Well, my friend, you have done all you could, and I have done all I could, and there the matter must rest till further notice. We have played our trump cards, Mr. Hartright,” continued the old gentleman when the servant had withdrawn. “For the present, at least, the women have outmanoeuvred us, and our only resource now is to wait till Sir Percival Glyde comes here on Monday next. Won’t you fill your glass again? Good bottle of port, that—sound, substantial, old wine. I have got better in my own cellar, though.”

We returned to the drawing-room—the room in which the happiest evenings of my life had been passed—the room which, after this last night, I was never to see again. Its aspect was altered since the days had shortened and the weather had grown cold. The glass doors on the terrace side were closed, and hidden by thick curtains. Instead of the soft twilight obscurity, in which we used to sit, the bright radiant glow of lamplight now dazzled my eyes. All was changed—in-doors and out all was changed.

Miss Halcombe and Mr. Gilmore sat down together at the card-table— Mrs. Vesey took her customary chair. There was no restraint on the disposal of THEIR evening, and I felt the restraint on the disposal of mine all the more painfully from observing it. I saw Miss Fairlie lingering near the music-stand. The time had been when I might have joined her there. I waited irresolutely—I knew neither where to go nor what to do next. She cast one quick glance at me, took a piece of music suddenly from the stand, and came towards me of her own accord.

“Shall I play some of those little melodies of Mozart’s which you used to like so much?” she asked, opening the music nervously, and looking down at it while she spoke.

Before I could thank her she hastened to the piano. The chair near it, which I had always been accustomed to occupy, stood empty. She struck a few chords—then glanced round at me—then looked back again at her music.

“Won’t you take your old place?” she said, speaking very abruptly and in very low tones.

“I may take it on the last night,” I answered.

She did not reply—she kept her attention riveted on the music— music which she knew by memory, which she had played over and over again, in former times, without the book. I only knew that she had heard me, I only knew that she was aware of my being close to her, by seeing the red spot on the cheek that was nearest to me fade out, and the face grow pale all over.

“I am very sorry you are going,” she said, her voice almost sinking to a whisper, her eyes looking more and more intently at the music, her fingers flying over the keys of the piano with a strange feverish energy which I had never noticed in her before.

“I shall remember those kind words, Miss Fairlie, long after to-morrow has come and gone.”

The paleness grew whiter on her face, and she turned it farther away from me.

“Don’t speak of to-morrow,” she said. “Let the music speak to us of to-night, in a happier language than ours.”

Her lips trembled—a faint sigh fluttered from them, which she tried vainly to suppress. Her fingers wavered on the piano—she struck a false note, confused herself in trying to set it right, and dropped her hands angrily on her lap. Miss Halcombe and Mr. Gilmore looked up in astonishment from the card-table at which they were playing. Even Mrs. Vesey, dozing in her chair, woke at the sudden cessation of the music, and inquired what had happened.

“You play at whist, Mr. Hartright?” asked Miss Halcombe, with her eyes directed significantly at the place I occupied.

I knew what she meant—I knew she was right, and I rose at once to go to the card-table. As I left the piano Miss Fairlie turned a page of the music, and touched the keys again with a surer hand.

“I WILL play it,” she said, striking the notes almost passionately. “I WILL play it on the last night.”

“Come, Mrs. Vesey,” said Miss Halcombe, “Mr. Gilmore and I are tired of ecarte—come and be Mr. Hartright’s partner at whist.”

The old lawyer smiled satirically. His had been the winning hand, and he had just turned up a king. He evidently attributed Miss Halcombe’s abrupt change in the card-table arrangements to a lady’s inability to play the losing game.

The rest of the evening passed without a word or a look from her. She kept her place at the piano, and I kept mine at the card-table. She played unintermittingly—played as if the music was her only refuge from herself. Sometimes her fingers touched the notes with a lingering fondness—a soft, plaintive, dying tenderness,

unutterably beautiful and mournful to hear; sometimes they faltered and failed her, or hurried over the instrument mechanically, as if their task was a burden to them. But still, change and waver as they might in the expression they imparted to the music, their resolution to play never faltered. She only rose from the piano when we all rose to say Good-night.

Mrs. Vesey was the nearest to the door, and the first to shake hands with me.

“I shall not see you again, Mr. Hartright,” said the old lady. “I am truly sorry you are going away. You have been very kind and attentive, and an old woman like me feels kindness and attention. I wish you happy, sir—I wish you a kind good-bye.”

Mr. Gilmore came next.

“I hope we shall have a future opportunity of bettering our acquaintance, Mr. Hartright. You quite understand about that little matter of business being safe in my hands? Yes, yes, of course. Bless me, how cold it is! Don’t let me keep you at the door. Bon voyage, my dear sir—bon voyage, as the French say.”

Miss Halcombe followed.

“Half-past seven to-morrow morning,” she said—then added in a whisper, “I have heard and seen more than you think. Your conduct to-night has made me your friend for life.”

Miss Fairlie came last. I could not trust myself to look at her when I took her hand, and when I thought of the next morning.

“My departure must be a very early one,” I said. “I shall be gone, Miss Fairlie, before you——”

“No, no,” she interposed hastily, “not before I am out of my room. I shall be down to breakfast with Marian. I am not so ungrateful, not so forgetful of the past three months——”

Her voice failed her, her hand closed gently round mine—then dropped it suddenly. Before I could say “Good-night” she was gone.

The end comes fast to meet me—comes inevitably, as the light of the last morning came at Limmeridge House.

It was barely half-past seven when I went downstairs, but I found them both at the breakfast-table waiting for me. In the chill air, in the dim light, in the gloomy morning silence of the house, we three sat down together, and tried to eat, tried to talk. The struggle to preserve appearances was hopeless and useless, and I rose to end it.

As I held out my hand, as Miss Halcombe, who was nearest to me, took it, Miss Fairlie turned away suddenly and hurried from the room.



“Better so,” said Miss Halcombe, when the door had closed—“better so, for you and for her.”

I waited a moment before I could speak—it was hard to lose her, without a parting word or a parting look. I controlled myself—I tried to take leave of Miss Halcombe in fitting terms; but all the farewell words I would fain have spoken dwindled to one sentence.

“Have I deserved that you should write to me?” was all I could say.

“You have nobly deserved everything that I can do for you, as long as we both live. Whatever the end is you shall know it.”

“And if I can ever be of help again, at any future time, long after the memory of my presumption and my folly is forgotten ”

I could add no more. My voice faltered, my eyes moistened in spite of me.

She caught me by both hands—she pressed them with the strong, steady grasp of a man—her dark eyes glittered—her brown complexion flushed deep—the force and energy of her face glowed and grew beautiful with the pure inner light of her generosity and her pity.

“I will trust you—if ever the time comes I will trust you as my friend and HER friend, as my brother and HER brother.” She stopped, drew me nearer to her—the fearless, noble creature— touched my forehead, sister-like, with her lips, and called me by my Christian name. “God bless you, Walter!” she said. “Wait here alone and compose yourself—I had better not stay for both our sakes—I had better see you go from the balcony upstairs.”

She left the room. I turned away towards the window, where nothing faced me but the lonely autumn landscape—I turned away to master myself, before I too left the room in my turn, and left it for ever.

A minute passed—it could hardly have been more—when I heard the door open again softly, and the rustling of a woman’s dress on the carpet moved towards me. My heart beat violently as I turned round. Miss Fairlie was approaching me from the farther end of the room.

She stopped and hesitated when our eyes met, and when she saw that we were alone. Then, with that courage which women lose so often in the small emergency, and so seldom in the great, she came on nearer to me, strangely pale and strangely quiet, drawing one hand after her along the table by which she walked, and holding something at her side in the other, which was hidden by the folds of her dress.

“I only went into the drawing-room,” she said, “to look for this. It may remind you of your visit here, and of the friends you leave behind you. You told me I had improved very much when I did it, and I thought you might like——”

She turned her head away, and offered me a little sketch, drawn throughout by her own pencil, of the summer-house in which we had first met. The paper trembled in her hand as she held it out to me—trembled in mine as I took it from her.

I was afraid to say what I felt—I only answered, “It shall never leave me—all my life long it shall be the treasure that I prize most. I am very grateful for it—very grateful to you, for not letting me go away without bidding you good-bye.”

“Oh!” she said innocently, “how could I let you go, after we have passed so many happy days together!”

“Those days may never return, Miss Fairlie—my way of life and yours are very far apart. But if a time should come, when the devotion of my whole heart and soul and strength will give you a moment’s happiness, or spare you a moment’s sorrow, will you try to remember the poor drawing-master who has taught you? Miss Halcombe has promised to trust me—will you promise too?”

The farewell sadness in the kind blue eyes shone dimly through her gathering tears.

“I promise it,” she said in broken tones. “Oh, don’t look at me like that! I promise it with all my heart.”

I ventured a little nearer to her, and held out my hand.

“You have many friends who love you, Miss Fairlie. Your happy future is the dear object of many hopes. May I say, at parting, that it is the dear object of MY hopes too?”

The tears flowed fast down her cheeks. She rested one trembling hand on the table to steady herself while she gave me the other. I took it in mine—I held it fast. My head drooped over it, my tears fell on it, my lips pressed it—not in love; oh, not in love, at that last moment, but in the agony and the self- abandonment of despair.

“For God’s sake, leave me!” she said faintly.

The confession of her heart’s secret burst from her in those pleading words. I had no right to hear them, no right to answer them—they were the words that banished me, in the name of her sacred weakness, from the room. It was all over. I dropped her hand, I said no more. The blinding tears shut her out from my eyes, and I dashed them away to look at her for the last time. One look as she sank into a chair, as her arms fell on the table, as her fair head dropped on them wearily. One farewell look, and the door had closed upon her—the great gulf of separation had opened between us—the image of Laura Fairlie was a memory of the past already.

The End of Hartright’s Narrative.