



THE WOMAN
IN WHITE
WILKIE COLLINS



EPOCH ONE

The Story Begun by Vincent Gilmore, Part II

We all met again at dinner-time.

Sir Percival was in such boisterous high spirits that I hardly recognised him as the same man whose quiet tact, refinement, and good sense had impressed me so strongly at the interview of the morning. The only trace of his former self that I could detect reappeared, every now and then, in his manner towards Miss Fairlie. A look or a word from her suspended his loudest laugh, checked his gayest flow of talk, and rendered him all attention to her, and to no one else at table, in an instant. Although he never openly tried to draw her into the conversation, he never lost the slightest chance she gave him of letting her drift into it by accident, and of saying the words to her, under those favourable circumstances, which a man with less tact and delicacy would have pointedly addressed to her the moment they occurred to him. Rather to my surprise, Miss Fairlie appeared to be sensible of his attentions without being moved by them. She was a little confused from time to time when he looked at her, or spoke to her; but she never warmed towards him. Rank, fortune, good breeding, good looks, the respect of a gentleman, and the devotion of a lover were all humbly placed at her feet, and, so far as appearances went, were all offered in vain.

On the next day, the Tuesday, Sir Percival went in the morning (taking one of the servants with him as a guide) to Todd's Corner. His inquiries, as I afterwards heard, led to no results. On his return he had an interview with Mr. Fairlie, and in the afternoon he and Miss Halcombe rode out together. Nothing else happened worthy of record. The evening passed as usual. There was no change in Sir Percival, and no change in Miss Fairlie.

The Wednesday's post brought with it an event—the reply from Mrs. Catherick. I took a copy of the document, which I have preserved, and which I may as well present in this place. It ran as follows—

“MADAM,—I beg to acknowledge the receipt of your letter, inquiring whether my daughter, Anne, was placed under medical superintendence with my knowledge and



approval, and whether the share taken in the matter by Sir Percival Glyde was such as to merit the expression of my gratitude towards that gentleman. Be pleased to accept my answer in the affirmative to both those questions, and believe me to remain, your obedient servant,

“JANE ANNE CATHERICK.”

Short, sharp, and to the point; in form rather a business-like letter for a woman to write—in substance as plain a confirmation as could be desired of Sir Percival Glyde’s statement. This was my opinion, and with certain minor reservations, Miss Halcombe’s opinion also. Sir Percival, when the letter was shown to him, did not appear to be struck by the sharp, short tone of it. He told us that Mrs. Catherick was a woman of few words, a clear-headed, straightforward, unimaginative person, who wrote briefly and plainly, just as she spoke.

The next duty to be accomplished, now that the answer had been received, was to acquaint Miss Fairlie with Sir Percival’s explanation. Miss Halcombe had undertaken to do this, and had left the room to go to her sister, when she suddenly returned again, and sat down by the easy-chair in which I was reading the newspaper. Sir Percival had gone out a minute before to look at the stables, and no one was in the room but ourselves.

“I suppose we have really and truly done all we can?” she said, turning and twisting Mrs. Catherick’s letter in her hand.

“If we are friends of Sir Percival’s, who know him and trust him, we have done all, and more than all, that is necessary,” I answered, a little annoyed by this return of her hesitation. “But if we are enemies who suspect him——”

“That alternative is not even to be thought of,” she interposed. “We are Sir Percival’s friends, and if generosity and forbearance can add to our regard for him, we ought to be Sir Percival’s admirers as well. You know that he saw Mr. Fairlie yesterday, and that he afterwards went out with me.”

“Yes. I saw you riding away together.”

“We began the ride by talking about Anne Catherick, and about the singular manner in which Mr. Hartright met with her. But we soon dropped that subject, and Sir Percival spoke next, in the most unselfish terms, of his engagement with Laura. He said he had observed that she was out of spirits, and he was willing, if not informed to the contrary, to attribute to that cause the alteration in her manner towards him during his present visit. If, however, there was any more serious reason for the change, he would entreat that no constraint might be placed on her inclinations either by Mr. Fairlie or by

me. All he asked, in that case, was that she would recall to mind, for the last time, what the circumstances were under which the engagement between them was made, and what his conduct had been from the beginning of the courtship to the present time. If, after due reflection on those two subjects, she seriously desired that he should withdraw his pretensions to the honour of becoming her husband—and if she would tell him so plainly with her own lips—he would sacrifice himself by leaving her perfectly free to withdraw from the engagement.”

“No man could say more than that, Miss Halcombe. As to my experience, few men in his situation would have said as much.”

She paused after I had spoken those words, and looked at me with a singular expression of perplexity and distress.

“I accuse nobody, and I suspect nothing,” she broke out abruptly. “But I cannot and will not accept the responsibility of persuading Laura to this marriage.”

“That is exactly the course which Sir Percival Glyde has himself requested you to take,” I replied in astonishment. “He has begged you not to force her inclinations.”

“And he indirectly obliges me to force them, if I give her his message.”

“How can that possibly be?”

“Consult your own knowledge of Laura, Mr. Gilmore. If I tell her to reflect on the circumstances of her engagement, I at once appeal to two of the strongest feelings in her nature—to her love for her father’s memory, and to her strict regard for truth. You know that she never broke a promise in her life—you know that she entered on this engagement at the beginning of her father’s fatal illness, and that he spoke hopefully and happily of her marriage to Sir Percival Glyde on his deathbed.”

I own that I was a little shocked at this view of the case.

“Surely,” I said, “you don’t mean to infer that when Sir Percival spoke to you yesterday he speculated on such a result as you have just mentioned?”

Her frank, fearless face answered for her before she spoke.

“Do you think I would remain an instant in the company of any man whom I suspected of such baseness as that?” she asked angrily.

I liked to feel her hearty indignation flash out on me in that way. We see so much malice and so little indignation in my profession.

“In that case,” I said, “excuse me if I tell you, in our legal phrase, that you are travelling out of the record. Whatever the consequences may be, Sir Percival has a right to expect that your sister should carefully consider her engagement from every reasonable point of view before she claims her release from it. If that unlucky letter has

prejudiced her against him, go at once, and tell her that he has cleared himself in your eyes and in mine. What objection can she urge against him after that? What excuse can she possibly have for changing her mind about a man whom she had virtually accepted for her husband more than two years ago?"

"In the eyes of law and reason, Mr. Gilmore, no excuse, I daresay. If she still hesitates, and if I still hesitate, you must attribute our strange conduct, if you like, to caprice in both cases, and we must bear the imputation as well as we can."

With those words she suddenly rose and left me. When a sensible woman has a serious question put to her, and evades it by a flippant answer, it is a sure sign, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, that she has something to conceal. I returned to the perusal of the newspaper, strongly suspecting that Miss Halcombe and Miss Fairlie had a secret between them which they were keeping from Sir Percival, and keeping from me. I thought this hard on both of us, especially on Sir Percival.

My doubts—or to speak more correctly, my convictions—were confirmed by Miss Halcombe's language and manner when I saw her again later in the day. She was suspiciously brief and reserved in telling me the result of her interview with her sister. Miss Fairlie, it appeared, had listened quietly while the affair of the letter was placed before her in the right point of view, but when Miss Halcombe next proceeded to say that the object of Sir Percival's visit at Limmeridge was to prevail on her to let a day be fixed for the marriage she checked all further reference to the subject by begging for time. If Sir Percival would consent to spare her for the present, she would undertake to give him his final answer before the end of the year. She pleaded for this delay with such anxiety and agitation, that Miss Halcombe had promised to use her influence, if necessary, to obtain it, and there, at Miss Fairlie's earnest entreaty, all further discussion of the marriage question had ended.

The purely temporary arrangement thus proposed might have been convenient enough to the young lady, but it proved somewhat embarrassing to the writer of these lines. That morning's post had brought a letter from my partner, which obliged me to return to town the next day by the afternoon train. It was extremely probable that I should find no second opportunity of presenting myself at Limmeridge House during the remainder of the year. In that case, supposing Miss Fairlie ultimately decided on holding to her engagement, my necessary personal communication with her, before I drew her settlement, would become something like a downright impossibility, and we should be obliged to commit to writing questions which ought always to be discussed on both sides by word of mouth. I said nothing about this difficulty until Sir Percival



had been consulted on the subject of the desired delay. He was too gallant a gentleman not to grant the request immediately. When Miss Halcombe informed me of this I told her that I must absolutely speak to her sister before I left Limmeridge, and it was, therefore, arranged that I should see Miss Fairlie in her own sitting-room the next morning. She did not come down to dinner, or join us in the evening. Indisposition was the excuse, and I thought Sir Percival looked, as well he might, a little annoyed when he heard of it.

The next morning, as soon as breakfast was over, I went up to Miss Fairlie's sitting-room. The poor girl looked so pale and sad, and came forward to welcome me so readily and prettily, that the resolution to lecture her on her caprice and indecision, which I had been forming all the way upstairs, failed me on the spot. I led her back to the chair from which she had risen, and placed myself opposite to her. Her cross-grained pet greyhound was in the room, and I fully expected a barking and snapping reception. Strange to say, the whimsical little brute falsified my expectations by jumping into my lap and poking its sharp muzzle familiarly into my hand the moment I sat down.

"You used often to sit on my knee when you were a child. my dear," I said, "and now your little dog seems determined to succeed you in the vacant throne. Is that pretty drawing your doing?"

I pointed to a little album which lay on the table by her side and which she had evidently been looking over when I came in. The page that lay open had a small water-colour landscape very neatly mounted on it. This was the drawing which had suggested my question—an idle question enough—but how could I begin to talk of business to her the moment I opened my lips?

"No," she said, looking away from the drawing rather confusedly, "it is not my doing."

Her fingers had a restless habit, which I remembered in her as a child, of always playing with the first thing that came to hand whenever any one was talking to her. On this occasion they wandered to the album, and toyed absently about the margin of the little water-colour drawing. The expression of melancholy deepened on her face. She did not look at the drawing, or look at me. Her eyes moved uneasily from object to object in the room, betraying plainly that she suspected what my purpose was in coming to speak to her. Seeing that, I thought it best to get to the purpose with as little delay as possible.

"One of the errands, my dear, which brings me here is to bid you good-bye," I began. "I must get back to London to-day: and, before I leave, I want to have a word with you on the subject of your own affairs."



“I am very sorry you are going, Mr. Gilmore,” she said, looking at me kindly. “It is like the happy old times to have you here.

“I hope I may be able to come back and recall those pleasant memories once more,” I continued; “but as there is some uncertainty about the future, I must take my opportunity when I can get it, and speak to you now. I am your old lawyer and your old friend, and I may remind you, I am sure, without offence, of the possibility of your marrying Sir Percival Glyde.”

She took her hand off the little album as suddenly as if it had turned hot and burnt her. Her fingers twined together nervously in her lap, her eyes looked down again at the floor, and an expression of constraint settled on her face which looked almost like an expression of pain.

“Is it absolutely necessary to speak of my marriage engagement?” she asked in low tones.

“It is necessary to refer to it,” I answered, “but not to dwell on it. Let us merely say that you may marry, or that you may not marry. In the first case, I must be prepared, beforehand, to draw your settlement, and I ought not to do that without, as a matter of politeness, first consulting you. This may be my only chance of hearing what your wishes are. Let us, therefore, suppose the case of your marrying, and let me inform you, in as few words as possible, what your position is now, and what you may make it, if you please, in the future.”

I explained to her the object of a marriage-settlement, and then told her exactly what her prospects were—in the first place, on her coming of age, and in the second place, on the decease of her uncle—marking the distinction between the property in which she had a life-interest only, and the property which was left at her own control. She listened attentively, with the constrained expression still on her face, and her hands still nervously clasped together in her lap.

“And now,” I said in conclusion, “tell me if you can think of any condition which, in the case we have supposed, you would wish me to make for you—subject, of course, to your guardian’s approval, as you are not yet of age.”

She moved uneasily in her chair, then looked in my face on a sudden very earnestly.

“If it does happen,” she began faintly, “if I am——”

“If you are married,” I added, helping her out.

“Don’t let him part me from Marian,” she cried, with a sudden outbreak of energy. “Oh, Mr. Gilmore, pray make it law that Marian is to live with me!”

Under other circumstances I might, perhaps, have been amused at this essentially feminine interpretation of my question, and of the long explanation which had preceded it. But her looks and tones, when she spoke, were of a kind to make me more than serious—they distressed me. Her words, few as they were, betrayed a desperate clinging to the past which boded ill for the future.

“Your having Marian Halcombe to live with you can easily be settled by private arrangement,” I said. “You hardly understood my question, I think. It referred to your own property—to the disposal of your money. Supposing you were to make a will when you come of age, who would you like the money to go to?”

“Marian has been mother and sister both to me,” said the good, affectionate girl, her pretty blue eyes glistening while she spoke. “May I leave it to Marian, Mr. Gilmore?”

“Certainly, my love,” I answered. “But remember what a large sum it is. Would you like it all to go to Miss Halcombe?”

She hesitated; her colour came and went, and her hand stole back again to the little album.

“Not all of it,” she said. “There is some one else besides Marian——”

She stopped; her colour heightened, and the fingers of the hand that rested upon the album beat gently on the margin of the drawing, as if her memory had set them going mechanically with the remembrance of a favourite tune.

“You mean some other member of the family besides Miss Halcombe?” I suggested, seeing her at a loss to proceed.

The heightening colour spread to her forehead and her neck, and the nervous fingers suddenly clasped themselves fast round the edge of the book.

“There is some one else,” she said, not noticing my last words, though she had evidently heard them; “there is some one else who might like a little keepsake if—if I might leave it. There would be no harm if I should die first——”

She paused again. The colour that had spread over her cheeks suddenly, as suddenly left them. The hand on the album resigned its hold, trembled a little, and moved the book away from her. She looked at me for an instant—then turned her head aside in the chair. Her handkerchief fell to the floor as she changed her position, and she hurriedly hid her face from me in her hands.

Sad! To remember her, as I did, the liveliest, happiest child that ever laughed the day through, and to see her now, in the flower of her age and her beauty, so broken and so brought down as this!

In the distress that she caused me I forgot the years that had passed, and the change they had made in our position towards one another. I moved my chair close to her, and picked up her handkerchief from the carpet, and drew her hands from her face gently. “Don’t cry, my love,” I said, and dried the tears that were gathering in her eyes with my own hand, as if she had been the little Laura Fairlie of ten long years ago.

It was the best way I could have taken to compose her. She laid her head on my shoulder, and smiled faintly through her tears.

“I am very sorry for forgetting myself,” she said artlessly. “I have not been well—I have felt sadly weak and nervous lately, and I often cry without reason when I am alone. I am better now—I can answer you as I ought, Mr. Gilmore, I can indeed.”

“No, no, my dear,” I replied, “we will consider the subject as done with for the present. You have said enough to sanction my taking the best possible care of your interests, and we can settle details at another opportunity. Let us have done with business now, and talk of something else.”

I led her at once into speaking on other topics. In ten minutes’ time she was in better spirits, and I rose to take my leave.

“Come here again,” she said earnestly. “I will try to be worthier of your kind feeling for me and for my interests if you will only come again.”

Still clinging to the past—that past which I represented to her, in my way, as Miss Halcombe did in hers! It troubled me sorely to see her looking back, at the beginning of her career, just as I look back at the end of mine.

“If I do come again, I hope I shall find you better,” I said; “better and happier. God bless you, my dear!”

She only answered by putting up her cheek to me to be kissed. Even lawyers have hearts, and mine ached a little as I took leave of her.

The whole interview between us had hardly lasted more than half an hour—she had not breathed a word, in my presence, to explain the mystery of her evident distress and dismay at the prospect of her marriage, and yet she had contrived to win me over to her side of the question, I neither knew how nor why. I had entered the room, feeling that Sir Percival Glyde had fair reason to complain of the manner in which she was treating him. I left it, secretly hoping that matters might end in her taking him at his word and claiming her release. A man of my age and experience ought to have known better than to vacillate in this unreasonable manner. I can make no excuse for myself; I can only tell the truth, and say—so it was.

The hour for my departure was now drawing near. I sent to Mr. Fairlie to say that I would wait on him to take leave if he liked, but that he must excuse my being rather

in a hurry. He sent a message back, written in pencil on a slip of paper: “Kind love and best wishes, dear Gilmore. Hurry of any kind is inexpressibly injurious to me. Pray take care of yourself. Good-bye.”

Just before I left I saw Miss Halcombe for a moment alone.

“Have you said all you wanted to Laura?” she asked.

“Yes,” I replied. “She is very weak and nervous—I am glad she has you to take care of her.”

Miss Halcombe’s sharp eyes studied my face attentively.

“You are altering your opinion about Laura,” she said. “You are readier to make allowances for her than you were yesterday.”

No sensible man ever engages, unprepared, in a fencing match of words with a woman. I only answered—

“Let me know what happens. I will do nothing till I hear from you.”

She still looked hard in my face. “I wish it was all over, and well over, Mr. Gilmore—and so do you.” With those words she left me.

Sir Percival most politely insisted on seeing me to the carriage door.

“If you are ever in my neighbourhood,” he said, “pray don’t forget that I am sincerely anxious to improve our acquaintance. The tried and trusted old friend of this family will be always a welcome visitor in any house of mine.”

A really irresistible man—courteous, considerate, delightfully free from pride—a gentleman, every inch of him. As I drove away to the station I felt as if I could cheerfully do anything to promote the interests of Sir Percival Glyde—anything in the world, except drawing the marriage settlement of his wife.