



THE WOMAN IN WHITE

WILKIE COLLINS



EPOCH ONE

The Story Begun by Vincent Gilmore, Part IV

Leaving by an early train, I got to Limmeridge in time for dinner. The house was oppressively empty and dull. I had expected that good Mrs. Vesey would have been company for me in the absence of the young ladies, but she was confined to her room by a cold. The servants were so surprised at seeing me that they hurried and bustled absurdly, and made all sorts of annoying mistakes. Even the butler, who was old enough to have known better, brought me a bottle of port that was chilled. The reports of Mr. Fairlie's health were just as usual, and when I sent up a message to announce my arrival, I was told that he would be delighted to see me the next morning but that the sudden news of my appearance had prostrated him with palpitations for the rest of the evening. The wind howled dismally all night, and strange cracking and groaning noises sounded here, there, and everywhere in the empty house. I slept as wretchedly as possible, and got up in a mighty bad humour to breakfast by myself the next morning.

At ten o'clock I was conducted to Mr. Fairlie's apartments. He was in his usual room, his usual chair, and his usual aggravating state of mind and body. When I went in, his valet was standing before him, holding up for inspection a heavy volume of etchings, as long and as broad as my office writing-desk. The miserable foreigner grinned in the most abject manner, and looked ready to drop with fatigue, while his master composedly turned over the etchings, and brought their hidden beauties to light with the help of a magnifying glass.

"You very best of good old friends," said Mr. Fairlie, leaning back lazily before he could look at me, "are you **QUITE** well? How nice of you to come here and see me in my solitude. Dear Gilmore!"

I had expected that the valet would be dismissed when I appeared, but nothing of the sort happened. There he stood, in front of his master's chair, trembling under the weight of the etchings, and there Mr. Fairlie sat, serenely twirling the magnifying glass between his white fingers and thumbs.

“I have come to speak to you on a very important matter,” I said, “and you will therefore excuse me, if I suggest that we had better be alone.”

The unfortunate valet looked at me gratefully. Mr. Fairlie faintly repeated my last three words, “better be alone,” with every appearance of the utmost possible astonishment.

I was in no humour for trifling, and I resolved to make him understand what I meant.

“Oblige me by giving that man permission to withdraw,” I said, pointing to the valet.

Mr. Fairlie arched his eyebrows and pursed up his lips in sarcastic surprise.

“Man?” he repeated. “You provoking old Gilmore, what can you possibly mean by calling him a man? He’s nothing of the sort. He might have been a man half an hour ago, before I wanted my etchings, and he may be a man half an hour hence, when I don’t want them any longer. At present he is simply a portfolio stand. Why object, Gilmore, to a portfolio stand?”

“I DO object. For the third time, Mr. Fairlie, I beg that we may be alone.”

My tone and manner left him no alternative but to comply with my request. He looked at the servant, and pointed peevishly to a chair at his side.

“Put down the etchings and go away,” he said. “Don’t upset me by losing my place. Have you, or have you not, lost my place? Are you sure you have not? And have you put my hand-bell quite within my reach? Yes? Then why the devil don’t you go?”

The valet went out. Mr. Fairlie twisted himself round in his chair, polished the magnifying glass with his delicate cambric handkerchief, and indulged himself with a sidelong inspection of the open volume of etchings. It was not easy to keep my temper under these circumstances, but I did keep it.

“I have come here at great personal inconvenience,” I said, “to serve the interests of your niece and your family, and I think I have established some slight claim to be favoured with your attention in return.”

“Don’t bully me!” exclaimed Mr. Fairlie, falling back helplessly in the chair, and closing his eyes. “Please don’t bully me. I’m not strong enough.”

I was determined not to let him provoke me, for Laura Fairlie’s sake.

“My object,” I went on, “is to entreat you to reconsider your letter, and not to force me to abandon the just rights of your niece, and of all who belong to her. Let me state the case to you once more, and for the last time.”

Mr. Fairlie shook his head and sighed piteously.

“This is heartless of you, Gilmore—very heartless,” he said. “Never mind, go on.”

I put all the points to him carefully—I set the matter before him in every conceivable light. He lay back in the chair the whole time I was speaking with his eyes closed. When I had done he opened them indolently, took his silver smelling-bottle from the table, and sniffed at it with an air of gentle relish.

“Good Gilmore!” he said between the sniffs, “how very nice this is of you! How you reconcile one to human nature!”

“Give me a plain answer to a plain question, Mr. Fairlie. I tell you again, Sir Percival Glyde has no shadow of a claim to expect more than the income of the money. The money itself if your niece has no children, ought to be under her control, and to return to her family. If you stand firm, Sir Percival must give way—he must give way, I tell you, or he exposes himself to the base imputation of marrying Miss Fairlie entirely from mercenary motives.”

Mr. Fairlie shook the silver smelling-bottle at me playfully.

“You dear old Gilmore, how you do hate rank and family, don’t you? How you detest Glyde because he happens to be a baronet. What a Radical you are—oh, dear me, what a Radical you are!”

A Radical!!! I could put up with a good deal of provocation, but, after holding the soundest Conservative principles all my life, I could NOT put up with being called a Radical. My blood boiled at it—I started out of my chair—I was speechless with Indignation.

“Don’t shake the room!” cried Mr. Fairlie—“for Heaven’s sake don’t shake the room! Worthiest of all possible Gilmores, I meant no offence. My own views are so extremely liberal that I think I am a Radical myself. Yes. We are a pair of Radicals. Please don’t be angry. I can’t quarrel—I haven’t stamina enough. Shall we drop the subject? Yes. Come and look at these sweet etchings. Do let me teach you to understand the heavenly pearliness of these lines. Do now, there’s a good Gilmore!”

While he was maundering on in this way I was, fortunately for my own self-respect, returning to my senses. When I spoke again I was composed enough to treat his impertinence with the silent contempt that it deserved.

“You are entirely wrong, sir,” I said, “in supposing that I speak from any prejudice against Sir Percival Glyde. I may regret that he has so unreservedly resigned himself in this matter to his lawyer’s direction as to make any appeal to himself impossible, but I am not prejudiced against him. What I have said would equally apply to any other man in his situation, high or low. The principle I maintain is a recognised principle. If you

were to apply at the nearest town here, to the first respectable solicitor you could find, he would tell you as a stranger what I tell you as a friend. He would inform you that it is against all rule to abandon the lady's money entirely to the man she marries. He would decline, on grounds of common legal caution, to give the husband, under any circumstances whatever, an interest of twenty thousand pounds in his wife's death."

"Would he really, Gilmore?" said Mr. Fairlie. "If he said anything half so horrid, I do assure you I should tinkle my bell for Louis, and have him sent out of the house immediately."

"You shall not irritate me, Mr. Fairlie—for your niece's sake and for her father's sake, you shall not irritate me. You shall take the whole responsibility of this discreditable settlement on your own shoulders before I leave the room."

"Don't!—now please don't!" said Mr. Fairlie. "Think how precious your time is, Gilmore, and don't throw it away. I would dispute with you if I could, but I can't—I haven't stamina enough. You want to upset me, to upset yourself, to upset Glyde, and to upset Laura; and—oh, dear me!—all for the sake of the very last thing in the world that is likely to happen. No, dear friend, in the interests of peace and quietness, positively No!"

"I am to understand, then, that you hold by the determination expressed in your letter?"

"Yes, please. So glad we understand each other at last. Sit down again—do!"

I walked at once to the door, and Mr. Fairlie resignedly "tinkled" his hand-bell. Before I left the room I turned round and addressed him for the last time.

"Whatever happens in the future, sir," I said, "remember that my plain duty of warning you has been performed. As the faithful friend and servant of your family, I tell you, at parting, that no daughter of mine should be married to any man alive under such a settlement as you are forcing me to make for Miss Fairlie."

The door opened behind me, and the valet stood waiting on the threshold.

"Louis," said Mr. Fairlie, "show Mr. Gilmore out, and then come back and hold up my etchings for me again. Make them give you a good lunch downstairs. Do, Gilmore, make my idle beasts of servants give you a good lunch!"

I was too much disgusted to reply—I turned on my heel, and left him in silence. There was an up train at two o'clock in the afternoon, and by that train I returned to London.

On the Tuesday I sent in the altered settlement, which practically disinherited the very persons whom Miss Fairlie's own lips had informed me she was most anxious to

benefit. I had no choice. Another lawyer would have drawn up the deed if I had refused to undertake it.

My task is done. My personal share in the events of the family story extends no farther than the point which I have just reached. Other pens than mine will describe the strange circumstances which are now shortly to follow. Seriously and sorrowfully I close this brief record. Seriously and sorrowfully I repeat here the parting words that I spoke at Limmeridge House:—No daughter of mine should have been married to any man alive under such a settlement as I was compelled to make for Laura Fairlie.

The End of Mr. Gilmore's Narrative.

