



THE WOMAN
IN WHITE
WILKIE COLLINS



EPOCH TWO

The Story Continued in Several Narratives, Part I

1. THE NARRATIVE OF HESTER PINHORN, COOK IN THE SERVICE OF
COUNT FOSCO

[Taken down from her own statement]

I am sorry to say that I have never learnt to read or write. I have been a hard-working woman all my life, and have kept a good character. I know that it is a sin and wickedness to say the thing which is not, and I will truly beware of doing so on this occasion. All that I know I will tell, and I humbly beg the gentleman who takes this down to put my language right as he goes on, and to make allowances for my being no scholar.

In this last summer I happened to be out of place (through no fault of my own), and I heard of a situation as plain cook, at Number Five, Forest Road, St. John's Wood. I took the place on trial. My master's name was Fosco. My mistress was an English lady. He was Count and she was Countess. There was a girl to do housemaid's work when I got there. She was not over-clean or tidy, but there was no harm in her. I and she were the only servants in the house.

Our master and mistress came after we got in; and as soon as they did come we were told, downstairs, that company was expected from the country.

The company was my mistress's niece, and the back bedroom on the first floor was got ready for her. My mistress mentioned to me that Lady Glyde (that was her name) was in poor health, and that I must be particular in my cooking accordingly. She was to come that day, as well as I can remember—but whatever you do, don't trust my memory in the matter. I am sorry to say it's no use asking me about days of the month, and such-like. Except Sundays, half my time I take no heed of them, being a hard-working woman and no scholar. All I know is Lady Glyde came, and when she did come, a fine fright she gave us all surely. I don't know how master brought her to the



house, being hard at work at the time. But he did bring her in the afternoon, I think, and the housemaid opened the door to them, and showed them into the parlour. Before she had been long down in the kitchen again with me, we heard a hurry-skurry upstairs, and the parlour bell ringing like mad, and my mistress's voice calling out for help.

We both ran up, and there we saw the lady laid on the sofa, with her face ghastly white, and her hands fast clenched, and her head drawn down to one side. She had been taken with a sudden fright, my mistress said, and master he told us she was in a fit of convulsions. I ran out, knowing the neighbourhood a little better than the rest of them, to fetch the nearest doctor's help. The nearest help was at Goodricke's and Garth's, who worked together as partners, and had a good name and connection, as I have heard, all round St. John's Wood. Mr. Goodricke was in, and he came back with me directly.

It was some time before he could make himself of much use. The poor unfortunate lady fell out of one fit into another, and went on so till she was quite wearied out, and as helpless as a new-born babe. We then got her to bed. Mr. Goodricke went away to his house for medicine, and came back again in a quarter of an hour or less. Besides the medicine he brought a bit of hollow mahogany wood with him, shaped like a kind of trumpet, and after waiting a little while, he put one end over the lady's heart and the other to his ear, and listened carefully.

When he had done he says to my mistress, who was in the room, "This is a very serious case," he says, "I recommend you to write to Lady Glyde's friends directly." My mistress says to him, "Is it heart-disease?" And he says, "Yes, heart-disease of a most dangerous kind." He told her exactly what he thought was the matter, which I was not clever enough to understand. But I know this, he ended by saying that he was afraid neither his help nor any other doctor's help was likely to be of much service.

My mistress took this ill news more quietly than my master. He was a big, fat, odd sort of elderly man, who kept birds and white mice, and spoke to them as if they were so many Christian children. He seemed terribly cut up by what had happened. "Ah! poor Lady Glyde! poor dear Lady Glyde!" he says, and went stalking about, wringing his fat hands more like a play-actor than a gentleman. For one question my mistress asked the doctor about the lady's chances of getting round, he asked a good fifty at least. I declare he quite tormented us all, and when he was quiet at last, out he went into the bit of back garden, picking trumpety little nosegays, and asking me to take them upstairs and make the sick-room look pretty with them. As if THAT did any good. I think he must have been, at times, a little soft in his head. But he was not a bad master—he had a monstrous civil tongue of his own, and a jolly, easy, coaxing way

with him. I liked him a deal better than my mistress. She was a hard one, if ever there was a hard one yet.

Towards night-time the lady roused up a little. She had been so wearied out, before that, by the convulsions, that she never stirred hand or foot, or spoke a word to anybody. She moved in the bed now, and stared about her at the room and us in it. She must have been a nice-looking lady when well, with light hair, and blue eyes and all that. Her rest was troubled at night—at least so I heard from my mistress, who sat up alone with her. I only went in once before going to bed to see if I could be of any use, and then she was talking to herself in a confused, rambling manner. She seemed to want sadly to speak to somebody who was absent from her somewhere. I couldn't catch the name the first time, and the second time master knocked at the door, with his regular mouthful of questions, and another of his trumpery nose-gays.

When I went in early the next morning, the lady was clean worn out again, and lay in a kind of faint sleep. Mr. Goodricke brought his partner, Mr. Garth, with him to advise. They said she must not be disturbed out of her rest on any account. They asked my mistress many questions, at the other end of the room, about what the lady's health had been in past times, and who had attended her, and whether she had ever suffered much and long together under distress of mind. I remember my mistress said "Yes" to that last question. And Mr. Goodricke looked at Mr. Garth, and shook his head; and Mr. Garth looked at Mr. Goodricke, and shook his head. They seemed to think that the distress might have something to do with the mischief at the lady's heart. She was but a frail thing to look at, poor creature! Very little strength at any time, I should say—very little strength.

Later on the same morning, when she woke, the lady took a sudden turn, and got seemingly a great deal better. I was not let in again to see her, no more was the housemaid, for the reason that she was not to be disturbed by strangers. What I heard of her being better was through my master. He was in wonderful good spirits about the change, and looked in at the kitchen window from the garden, with his great big curly-brimmed white hat on, to go out.

"Good Mrs. Cook," says he, "Lady Glyde is better. My mind is more easy than it was, and I am going out to stretch my big legs with a sunny little summer walk. Shall I order for you, shall I market for you, Mrs. Cook? What are you making there? A nice tart for dinner? Much crust, if you please—much crisp crust, my dear, that melts and crumbles delicious in the mouth." That was his way. He was past sixty, and fond of pastry. Just think of that!

The doctor came again in the forenoon, and saw for himself that Lady Glyde had woke up better. He forbid us to talk to her, or to let her talk to us, in case she was that way disposed, saying she must be kept quiet before all things, and encouraged to sleep as much as possible. She did not seem to want to talk whenever I saw her, except overnight, when I couldn't make out what she was saying—she seemed too much worn down. Mr. Goodricke was not nearly in such good spirits about her as master. He said nothing when he came downstairs, except that he would call again at five o'clock.

About that time (which was before master came home again) the bell rang hard from the bedroom, and my mistress ran out into the landing, and called to me to go for Mr. Goodricke, and tell him the lady had fainted. I got on my bonnet and shawl, when, as good luck would have it, the doctor himself came to the house for his promised visit.

I let him in, and went upstairs along with him. "Lady Glyde was just as usual," says my mistress to him at the door; "she was awake, and looking about her in a strange, forlorn manner, when I heard her give a sort of half cry, and she fainted in a moment." The doctor went up to the bed, and stooped down over the sick lady. He looked very serious, all on a sudden, at the sight of her, and put his hand on her heart.

My mistress stared hard in Mr. Goodricke's face. "Not dead!" says she, whispering, and turning all of a tremble from head to foot.

"Yes," says the doctor, very quiet and grave. "Dead. I was afraid it would happen suddenly when I examined her heart yesterday." My mistress stepped back from the bedside while he was speaking, and trembled and trembled again. "Dead!" she whispers to herself; "dead so suddenly! dead so soon! What will the Count say?" Mr. Goodricke advised her to go downstairs, and quiet herself a little. "You have been sitting up all night," says he, "and your nerves are shaken. This person," says he, meaning me, "this person will stay in the room till I can send for the necessary assistance." My mistress did as he told her. "I must prepare the Count," she says. "I must carefully prepare the Count." And so she left us, shaking from head to foot, and went out.

"Your master is a foreigner," says Mr. Goodricke, when my mistress had left us. "Does he understand about registering the death?" "I can't rightly tell, sir," says I, "but I should think not." The doctor considered a minute, and then says he, "I don't usually do such things," says he, "but it may save the family trouble in this case if I register the death myself. I shall pass the district office in half an hour's time, and I can easily look in. Mention, if you please, that I will do so." "Yes, sir," says I, "with thanks, I'm sure, for your kindness in thinking of it." "You don't mind staying here till I can send

you the proper person?” says he. “No, sir,” says I; “I’ll stay with the poor lady till then. I suppose nothing more could be done, sir, than was done?” says I. “No,” says he, “nothing; she must have suffered sadly before ever I saw her—the case was hopeless when I was called in.” “Ah, dear me! we all come to it, sooner or later, don’t we, sir?” says I. He gave no answer to that—he didn’t seem to care about talking. He said, “Good-day,” and went out.

I stopped by the bedside from that time till the time when Mr. Goodricke sent the person in, as he had promised. She was, by name, Jane Gould. I considered her to be a respectable-looking woman. She made no remark, except to say that she understood what was wanted of her, and that she had winded a many of them in her time.

How master bore the news, when he first heard it, is more than I can tell, not having been present. When I did see him he looked awfully overcome by it, to be sure. He sat quiet in a corner, with his fat hands hanging over his thick knees, and his head down, and his eyes looking at nothing. He seemed not so much sorry, as scared and dazed like, by what had happened. My mistress managed all that was to be done about the funeral. It must have cost a sight of money—the coffin, in particular, being most beautiful. The dead lady’s husband was away, as we heard, in foreign parts. But my mistress (being her aunt) settled it with her friends in the country (Cumberland, I think) that she should be buried there, in the same grave along with her mother. Everything was done handsomely, in respect of the funeral, I say again, and master went down to attend the burying in the country himself. He looked grand in his deep mourning, with his big solemn face, and his slow walk, and his broad hatband—that he did!

In conclusion. I have to say, in answer to questions put to me—

(1) That neither I nor my fellow-servant ever saw my master give Lady Glyde any medicine himself.

(2) That he was never, to my knowledge and belief, left alone in the room with Lady Glyde.

(3) That I am not able to say what caused the sudden fright, which my mistress informed me had seized the lady on her first coming into the house. The cause was never explained, either to me or to my fellow-servant.

The above statement has been read over in my presence. I have nothing to add to it, or to take away from it. I say, on my oath as a Christian woman, this is the truth.

(Signed) HESTER PINHORN, Her + Mark.