



THE WOMAN
IN WHITE
WILKIE COLLINS



EPOCH TWO

The Story Continued in Several Narratives, Part V

5. THE NARRATIVE OF WALTER HARTRIGHT

Early in the summer of 1850 I and my surviving companions left the wilds and forests of Central America for home. Arrived at the coast, we took ship there for England. The vessel was wrecked in the Gulf of Mexico—I was among the few saved from the sea. It was my third escape from peril of death. Death by disease, death by the Indians, death by drowning—all three had approached me; all three had passed me by.

The survivors of the wreck were rescued by an American vessel bound for Liverpool. The ship reached her port on the thirteenth day of October 1850. We landed late in the afternoon, and I arrived in London the same night.

These pages are not the record of my wanderings and my dangers away from home. The motives which led me from my country and my friends to a new world of adventure and peril are known. From that self-imposed exile I came back, as I had hoped, prayed, believed I should come back—a changed man. In the waters of a new life I had tempered my nature afresh. In the stern school of extremity and danger my will had learnt to be strong, my heart to be resolute, my mind to rely on itself. I had gone out to fly from my own future. I came back to face it, as a man should.

To face it with that inevitable suppression of myself which I knew it would demand from me. I had parted with the worst bitterness of the past, but not with my heart's remembrance of the sorrow and the tenderness of that memorable time. I had not ceased to feel the one irreparable disappointment of my life—I had only learnt to bear it. Laura Fairlie was in all my thoughts when the ship bore me away, and I looked my last at England. Laura Fairlie was in all my thoughts when the ship brought me back, and the morning light showed the friendly shore in view.

My pen traces the old letters as my heart goes back to the old love. I write of her as Laura Fairlie still. It is hard to think of her, it is hard to speak of her, by her husband's name.



There are no more words of explanation to add on my appearance for the second time in these pages. This narrative, if I have the strength and the courage to write it, may now go on.

My first anxieties and first hopes when the morning came centred in my mother and my sister. I felt the necessity of preparing them for the joy and surprise of my return, after an absence during which it had been impossible for them to receive any tidings of me for months past. Early in the morning I sent a letter to the Hampstead Cottage, and followed it myself in an hour's time.

When the first meeting was over, when our quiet and composure of other days began gradually to return to us, I saw something in my mother's face which told me that a secret oppression lay heavy on her heart. There was more than love—there was sorrow in the anxious eyes that looked on me so tenderly—there was pity in the kind hand that slowly and fondly strengthened its hold on mine. We had no concealments from each other. She knew how the hope of my life had been wrecked—she knew why I had left her. It was on my lips to ask as composedly as I could if any letter had come for me from Miss Halcombe, if there was any news of her sister that I might hear. But when I looked in my mother's face I lost courage to put the question even in that guarded form. I could only say, doubtingly and restrainedly—

“You have something to tell me.”

My sister, who had been sitting opposite to us, rose suddenly without a word of explanation—rose and left the room.

My mother moved closer to me on the sofa and put her arms round my neck. Those fond arms trembled—the tears flowed fast over the faithful loving face.

“Walter!” she whispered, “my own darling! my heart is heavy for you. Oh, my son! my son! try to remember that I am still left!”

My head sank on her bosom. She had said all in saying those words.

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It was the morning of the third day since my return—the morning of the sixteenth of October.

I had remained with them at the cottage—I had tried hard not to embitter the happiness of my return to THEM as it was embittered to ME. I had done all man could to rise after the shock, and accept my life resignedly—to let my great sorrow come in tenderness to my heart, and not in despair. It was useless and hopeless. No

tears soothed my aching eyes, no relief came to me from my sister's sympathy or my mother's love.

On that third morning I opened my heart to them. At last the words passed my lips which I had longed to speak on the day when my mother told me of her death.

"Let me go away alone for a little while," I said. "I shall bear it better when I have looked once more at the place where I first saw her—when I have knelt and prayed by the grave where they have laid her to rest."

I departed on my journey—my journey to the grave of Laura Fairlie.

It was a quiet autumn afternoon when I stopped at the solitary station, and set forth alone on foot by the well-remembered road. The waning sun was shining faintly through thin white clouds—the air was warm and still—the peacefulness of the lonely country was overshadowed and saddened by the influence of the falling year.

I reached the moor—I stood again on the brow of the hill—I looked on along the path—and there were the familiar garden trees in the distance, the clear sweeping semicircle of the drive, the high white walls of Limmeridge House. The chances and changes, the wanderings and dangers of months and months past, all shrank and shrivelled to nothing in my mind. It was like yesterday since my feet had last trodden the fragrant heathy ground. I thought I should see her coming to meet me, with her little straw hat shading her face, her simple dress fluttering in the air, and her well-filled sketch-book ready in her hand.

Oh death, thou hast thy sting! oh, grave, thou hast thy victory!

I turned aside, and there below me in the glen was the lonesome grey church, the porch where I had waited for the coming of the woman in white, the hills encircling the quiet burial-ground, the brook bubbling cold over its stony bed. There was the marble cross, fair and white, at the head of the tomb—the tomb that now rose over mother and daughter alike.

I approached the grave. I crossed once more the low stone stile, and bared my head as I touched the sacred ground. Sacred to gentleness and goodness, sacred to reverence and grief.

I stopped before the pedestal from which the cross rose. On one side of it, on the side nearest to me, the newly-cut inscription met my eyes—the hard, clear, cruel black letters which told the story of her life and death. I tried to read them. I did read as far as the name. "Sacred to the Memory of Laura——" The kind blue eyes dim with tears—the fair head drooping wearily—the innocent parting words which implored me to

leave her—oh, for a happier last memory of her than this; the memory I took away with me, the memory I bring back with me to her grave!

A second time I tried to read the inscription. I saw at the end the date of her death, and above it——

Above it there were lines on the marble—there was a name among them which disturbed my thoughts of her. I went round to the other side of the grave, where there was nothing to read, nothing of earthly vileness to force its way between her spirit and mine.

I knelt down by the tomb. I laid my hands, I laid my head on the broad white stone, and closed my weary eyes on the earth around, on the light above. I let her come back to me. Oh, my love! my love! my heart may speak to you NOW! It is yesterday again since we parted—yesterday, since your dear hand lay in mine—yesterday, since my eyes looked their last on you. My love! my love!

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Time had flowed on, and silence had fallen like thick night over its course.

The first sound that came after the heavenly peace rustled faintly like a passing breath of air over the grass of the burial-ground. I heard it nearing me slowly, until it came changed to my ear— came like footsteps moving onward—then stopped.

I looked up.

The sunset was near at hand. The clouds had parted—the slanting light fell mellow over the hills. The last of the day was cold and clear and still in the quiet valley of the dead.

Beyond me, in the burial-ground, standing together in the cold clearness of the lower light, I saw two women. They were looking towards the tomb, looking towards me.

Two.

They came a little on, and stopped again. Their veils were down, and hid their faces from me. When they stopped, one of them raised her veil. In the still evening light I saw the face of Marian Halcombe.

Changed, changed as if years had passed over it! The eyes large and wild, and looking at me with a strange terror in them. The face worn and wasted piteously. Pain and fear and grief written on her as with a brand.



I took one step towards her from the grave. She never moved—she never spoke. The veiled woman with her cried out faintly. I stopped. The springs of my life fell low, and the shuddering of an unutterable dread crept over me from head to foot.

The woman with the veiled face moved away from her companion, and came towards me slowly. Left by herself, standing by herself, Marian Halcombe spoke. It was the voice that I remembered—the voice not changed, like the frightened eyes and the wasted face.

“My dream! my dream!” I heard her say those words softly in the awful silence. She sank on her knees, and raised her clasped hands to heaven. “Father! strengthen him. Father! help him in his hour of need.”

The woman came on, slowly and silently came on. I looked at her— at her, and at none other, from that moment.

The voice that was praying for me faltered and sank low—then rose on a sudden, and called affrightedly, called despairingly to me to come away.

But the veiled woman had possession of me, body and soul. She stopped on one side of the grave. We stood face to face with the tombstone between us. She was close to the inscription on the side of the pedestal. Her gown touched the black letters.

The voice came nearer, and rose and rose more passionately still. “Hide your face! don’t look at her! Oh, for God’s sake, spare him——”

The woman lifted her veil.

“Sacred to the Memory of Laura, Lady Glyde——”

Laura, Lady Glyde, was standing by the inscription, and was looking at me over the grave.

[The Second Epoch of the Story closes here.]