



THE WOMAN
IN WHITE
WILKIE COLLINS



EPOCH THREE

The Story Continued by Walter Hartright, Part III

This was the story of the past—the story so far as we knew it then.

Two obvious conclusions presented themselves to my mind after hearing it. In the first place, I saw darkly what the nature of the conspiracy had been, how chances had been watched, and how circumstances had been handled to ensure impunity to a daring and an intricate crime. While all details were still a mystery to me, the vile manner in which the personal resemblance between the woman in white and Lady Glyde had been turned to account was clear beyond a doubt. It was plain that Anne Catherick had been introduced into Count Fosco's house as Lady Glyde—it was plain that Lady Glyde had taken the dead woman's place in the Asylum—the substitution having been so managed as to make innocent people (the doctor and the two servants certainly, and the owner of the mad-house in all probability) accomplices in the crime

The second conclusion came as the necessary consequence of the first. We three had no mercy to expect from Count Fosco and Sir Percival Glyde. The success of the conspiracy had brought with it a clear gain to those two men of thirty thousand pounds—twenty thousand to one, ten thousand to the other through his wife. They had that interest, as well as other interests, in ensuring their impunity from exposure, and they would leave no stone unturned, no sacrifice unattempted, no treachery untried, to discover the place in which their victim was concealed, and to part her from the only friends she had in the world—Marian Halcombe and myself.

The sense of this serious peril—a peril which every day and every hour might bring nearer and nearer to us—was the one influence that guided me in fixing the place of our retreat. I chose it in the far east of London, where there were fewest idle people to lounge and look about them in the streets. I chose it in a poor and a populous neighbourhood—because the harder the struggle for existence among the men and women about us, the less the risk of their having the time or taking the pains to notice chance strangers who came among them. These were the great advantages I looked to, but our locality was a gain to us also in another and a hardly less important respect.



We could live cheaply by the daily work of my hands, and could save every farthing we possessed to forward the purpose, the righteous purpose, of redressing an infamous wrong—which, from first to last, I now kept steadily in view.

In a week's time Marian Halcombe and I had settled how the course of our new lives should be directed.

There were no other lodgers in the house, and we had the means of going in and out without passing through the shop. I arranged, for the present at least, that neither Marian nor Laura should stir outside the door without my being with them, and that in my absence from home they should let no one into their rooms on any pretence whatever. This rule established, I went to a friend whom I had known in former days—a wood engraver in large practice—to seek for employment, telling him, at the same time, that I had reasons for wishing to remain unknown.

He at once concluded that I was in debt, expressed his regret in the usual forms, and then promised to do what he could to assist me. I left his false impression undisturbed, and accepted the work he had to give. He knew that he could trust my experience and my industry. I had what he wanted, steadiness and facility, and though my earnings were but small, they sufficed for our necessities. As soon as we could feel certain of this, Marian Halcombe and I put together what we possessed. She had between two and three hundred pounds left of her own property, and I had nearly as much remaining from the purchase-money obtained by the sale of my drawing-master's practice before I left England. Together we made up between us more than four hundred pounds. I deposited this little fortune in a bank, to be kept for the expense of those secret inquiries and investigations which I was determined to set on foot, and to carry on by myself if I could find no one to help me. We calculated our weekly expenditure to the last farthing, and we never touched our little fund except in Laura's interests and for Laura's sake.

The house-work, which, if we had dared trust a stranger near us, would have been done by a servant, was taken on the first day, taken as her own right, by Marian Halcombe. "What a woman's hands ARE fit for," she said, "early and late, these hands of mine shall do." They trembled as she held them out. The wasted arms told their sad story of the past, as she turned up the sleeves of the poor plain dress that she wore for safety's sake; but the unquenchable spirit of the woman burnt bright in her even yet. I saw the big tears rise thick in her eyes, and fall slowly over her cheeks as she looked at me. She dashed them away with a touch of her old energy, and smiled with a faint reflection of her old good spirits. "Don't doubt my courage, Walter," she pleaded, "it's

my weakness that cries, not ME. The house-work shall conquer it if I can't." And she kept her word—the victory was won when we met in the evening, and she sat down to rest. Her large steady black eyes looked at me with a flash of their bright firmness of bygone days. "I am not quite broken down yet," she said. "I am worth trusting with my share of the work." Before I could answer, she added in a whisper, "And worth trusting with my share in the risk and the danger too. Remember that, if the time comes!"

I did remember it when the time came.

As early as the end of October the daily course of our lives had assumed its settled direction, and we three were as completely isolated in our place of concealment as if the house we lived in had been a desert island, and the great network of streets and the thousands of our fellow-creatures all round us the waters of an illimitable sea. I could now reckon on some leisure time for considering what my future plan of action should be, and how I might arm myself most securely at the outset for the coming struggle with Sir Percival and the Count.

I gave up all hope of appealing to my recognition of Laura, or to Marian's recognition of her, in proof of her identity. If we had loved her less dearly, if the instinct implanted in us by that love had not been far more certain than any exercise of reasoning, far keener than any process of observation, even we might have hesitated on first seeing her.

The outward changes wrought by the suffering and the terror of the past had fearfully, almost hopelessly, strengthened the fatal resemblance between Anne Catherick and herself. In my narrative of events at the time of my residence in Limmeridge House, I have recorded, from my own observation of the two, how the likeness, striking as it was when viewed generally, failed in many important points of similarity when tested in detail. In those former days, if they had both been seen together side by side, no person could for a moment have mistaken them one for the other—as has happened often in the instances of twins. I could not say this now. The sorrow and suffering which I had once blamed myself for associating even by a passing thought with the future of Laura Fairlie, HAD set their profaning marks on the youth and beauty of her face; and the fatal resemblance which I had once seen and shuddered at seeing, in idea only, was now a real and living resemblance which asserted itself before my own eyes. Strangers, acquaintances, friends even who could not look at her as we looked, if she had been shown to them in the first days of her rescue from the Asylum, might have doubted if she were the Laura Fairlie they had once seen, and doubted without blame.

The one remaining chance, which I had at first thought might be trusted to serve us—the chance of appealing to her recollection of persons and events with which no impostor could be familiar, was proved, by the sad test of our later experience, to be hopeless. Every little caution that Marian and I practised towards her—every little remedy we tried, to strengthen and steady slowly the weakened, shaken faculties, was a fresh protest in itself against the risk of turning her mind back on the troubled and the terrible past.

The only events of former days which we ventured on encouraging her to recall were the little trivial domestic events of that happy time at Limmeridge, when I first went there and taught her to draw. The day when I roused those remembrances by showing her the sketch of the summer-house which she had given me on the morning of our farewell, and which had never been separated from me since, was the birthday of our first hope. Tenderly and gradually, the memory of the old walks and drives dawned upon her, and the poor weary pining eyes looked at Marian and at me with a new interest, with a faltering thoughtfulness in them, which from that moment we cherished and kept alive. I bought her a little box of colours, and a sketch-book like the old sketch-book which I had seen in her hands on the morning that we first met. Once again—oh me, once again!—at spare hours saved from my work, in the dull London light, in the poor London room, I sat by her side to guide the faltering touch, to help the feeble hand. Day by day I raised and raised the new interest till its place in the blank of her existence was at last assured—till she could think of her drawing and talk of it, and patiently practise it by herself, with some faint reflection of the innocent pleasure in my encouragement, the growing enjoyment in her own progress, which belonged to the lost life and the lost happiness of past days.

We helped her mind slowly by this simple means, we took her out between us to walk on fine days, in a quiet old City square near at hand, where there was nothing to confuse or alarm her—we spared a few pounds from the fund at the banker's to get her wine, and the delicate strengthening food that she required—we amused her in the evenings with children's games at cards, with scrap-books full of prints which I borrowed from the engraver who employed me—by these, and other trifling attentions like them, we composed her and steadied her, and hoped all things, as cheerfully as we could from time and care, and love that never neglected and never despaired of her. But to take her mercilessly from seclusion and repose—to confront her with strangers, or with acquaintances who were little better than strangers—to rouse the painful impressions of her past life which we had so carefully hushed to rest—this, even in her

own interests, we dared not do. Whatever sacrifices it cost, whatever long, weary, heart-breaking delays it involved, the wrong that had been inflicted on her, if mortal means could grapple it, must be redressed without her knowledge and without her help.

This resolution settled, it was next necessary to decide how the first risk should be ventured, and what the first proceedings should be.

After consulting with Marian, I resolved to begin by gathering together as many facts as could be collected—then to ask the advice of Mr. Kyrle (whom we knew we could trust), and to ascertain from him, in the first instance, if the legal remedy lay fairly within our reach. I owed it to Laura's interests not to stake her whole future on my own unaided exertions, so long as there was the faintest prospect of strengthening our position by obtaining reliable assistance of any kind.

The first source of information to which I applied was the journal kept at Blackwater Park by Marian Halcombe. There were passages in this diary relating to myself which she thought it best that I should not see. Accordingly, she read to me from the manuscript, and I took the notes I wanted as she went on. We could only find time to pursue this occupation by sitting up late at night. Three nights were devoted to the purpose, and were enough to put me in possession of all that Marian could tell.

My next proceeding was to gain as much additional evidence as I could procure from other people without exciting suspicion. I went myself to Mrs. Vesey to ascertain if Laura's impression of having slept there was correct or not. In this case, from consideration for Mrs. Vesey's age and infirmity, and in all subsequent cases of the same kind from considerations of caution, I kept our real position a secret, and was always careful to speak of Laura as "the late Lady Glyde."

Mrs. Vesey's answer to my inquiries only confirmed the apprehensions which I had previously felt. Laura had certainly written to say she would pass the night under the roof of her old friend—but she had never been near the house.

Her mind in this instance, and, as I feared, in other instances besides, confusedly presented to her something which she had only intended to do in the false light of something which she had really done. The unconscious contradiction of herself was easy to account for in this way—but it was likely to lead to serious results. It was a stumble on the threshold at starting—it was a flaw in the evidence which told fatally against us.

When I next asked for the letter which Laura had written to Mrs. Vesey from Blackwater Park, it was given to me without the envelope, which had been thrown into the wastepaper basket, and long since destroyed. In the letter itself no date was

mentioned— not even the day of the week. It only contained these lines:— “Dearest Mrs. Vesey, I am in sad distress and anxiety, and I may come to your house to-morrow night, and ask for a bed. I can’t tell you what is the matter in this letter—I write it in such fear of being found out that I can fix my mind on nothing. Pray be at home to see me. I will give you a thousand kisses, and tell you everything. Your affectionate Laura.” What help was there in those lines? None.

On returning from Mrs. Vesey’s, I instructed Marian to write (observing the same caution which I practised myself) to Mrs. Michelson. She was to express, if she pleased, some general suspicion of Count Fosco’s conduct, and she was to ask the housekeeper to supply us with a plain statement of events, in the interests of truth. While we were waiting for the answer, which reached us in a week’s time, I went to the doctor in St. John’s Wood, introducing myself as sent by Miss Halcombe to collect, if possible, more particulars of her sister’s last illness than Mr. Kyrle had found the time to procure. By Mr. Goodricke’s assistance, I obtained a copy of the certificate of death, and an interview with the woman (Jane Gould) who had been employed to prepare the body for the grave. Through this person I also discovered a means of communicating with the servant, Hester Pinhorn. She had recently left her place in consequence of a disagreement with her mistress, and she was lodging with some people in the neighbourhood whom Mrs. Gould knew. In the manner here indicated I obtained the Narratives of the housekeeper, of the doctor, of Jane Gould, and of Hester Pinhorn, exactly as they are presented in these pages.

Furnished with such additional evidence as these documents afforded, I considered myself to be sufficiently prepared for a consultation with Mr. Kyrle, and Marian wrote accordingly to mention my name to him, and to specify the day and hour at which I requested to see him on private business.

There was time enough in the morning for me to take Laura out for her walk as usual, and to see her quietly settled at her drawing afterwards. She looked up at me with a new anxiety in her face as I rose to leave the room, and her fingers began to toy doubtfully, in the old way, with the brushes and pencils on the table.

“You are not tired of me yet?” she said. “You are not going away because you are tired of me? I will try to do better—I will try to get well. Are you as fond of me, Walter as you used to be, now I am so pale and thin, and so slow in learning to draw?”

She spoke as a child might have spoken, she showed me her thoughts as a child might have shown them. I waited a few minutes longer— waited to tell her that she was dearer to me now than she had ever been in the past times. “Try to get well again,” I

said, encouraging the new hope in the future which I saw dawning in her mind, “try to get well again, for Marian’s sake and for mine.”

“Yes,” she said to herself, returning to her drawing. “I must try, because they are both so fond of me.” She suddenly looked up again. “Don’t be gone long! I can’t get on with my drawing, Walter, when you are not here to help me.”

“I shall soon be back, my darling—soon be back to see how you are getting on.”

My voice faltered a little in spite of me. I forced myself from the room. It was no time, then, for parting with the self-control which might yet serve me in my need before the day was out.

As I opened the door, I beckoned to Marian to follow me to the stairs. It was necessary to prepare her for a result which I felt might sooner or later follow my showing myself openly in the streets.

“I shall, in all probability, be back in a few hours,” I said, “and you will take care, as usual, to let no one inside the doors in my absence. But if anything happens——”

“What can happen?” she interposed quickly. “Tell me plainly, Walter, if there is any danger, and I shall know how to meet it.”

“The only danger,” I replied, “is that Sir Percival Glyde may have been recalled to London by the news of Laura’s escape. You are aware that he had me watched before I left England, and that he probably knows me by sight, although I don’t know him?”

She laid her hand on my shoulder and looked at me in anxious silence. I saw she understood the serious risk that threatened us.

“It is not likely,” I said, “that I shall be seen in London again so soon, either by Sir Percival himself or by the persons in his employ. But it is barely possible that an accident may happen. In that case, you will not be alarmed if I fail to return to- night, and you will satisfy any inquiry of Laura’s with the best excuse that you can make for me? If I find the least reason to suspect that I am watched, I will take good care that no spy follows me back to this house. Don’t doubt my return, Marian, however it may be delayed—and fear nothing.”

“Nothing!” she answered firmly. “You shall not regret, Walter, that you have only a woman to help you.” She paused, and detained me for a moment longer. “Take care!” she said, pressing my hand anxiously—“take care!”

I left her, and set forth to pave the way for discovery—the dark and doubtful way, which began at the lawyer’s door.