



THE WOMAN
IN WHITE
WILKIE COLLINS



EPOCH THREE

The Story Continued by Walter Hartright, Part V

The story of my first inquiries in Hampshire is soon told.

My early departure from London enabled me to reach Mr. Dawson's house in the forenoon. Our interview, so far as the object of my visit was concerned, led to no satisfactory result.

Mr. Dawson's books certainly showed when he had resumed his attendance on Miss Halcombe at Blackwater Park, but it was not possible to calculate back from this date with any exactness, without such help from Mrs. Michelson as I knew she was unable to afford. She could not say from memory (who, in similar cases, ever can?) how many days had elapsed between the renewal of the doctor's attendance on his patient and the previous departure of Lady Glyde. She was almost certain of having mentioned the circumstance of the departure to Miss Halcombe, on the day after it happened—but then she was no more able to fix the date of the day on which this disclosure took place, than to fix the date of the day before, when Lady Glyde had left for London. Neither could she calculate, with any nearer approach to exactness, the time that had passed from the departure of her mistress, to the period when the undated letter from Madame Fosco arrived. Lastly, as if to complete the series of difficulties, the doctor himself, having been ill at the time, had omitted to make his usual entry of the day of the week and month when the gardener from Blackwater Park had called on him to deliver Mrs. Michelson's message.

Hopeless of obtaining assistance from Mr. Dawson, I resolved to try next if I could establish the date of Sir Percival's arrival at Knowlesbury.

It seemed like a fatality! When I reached Knowlesbury the inn was shut up, and bills were posted on the walls. The speculation had been a bad one, as I was informed, ever since the time of the railway. The new hotel at the station had gradually absorbed the business, and the old inn (which we knew to be the inn at which Sir Percival had put up), had been closed about two months since. The proprietor had left the town with all his goods and chattels, and where he had gone I could not positively ascertain from



any one. The four people of whom I inquired gave me four different accounts of his plans and projects when he left Knowlesbury.

There were still some hours to spare before the last train left for London, and I drove back again in a fly from the Knowlesbury station to Blackwater Park, with the purpose of questioning the gardener and the person who kept the lodge. If they, too, proved unable to assist me, my resources for the present were at an end, and I might return to town.

I dismissed the fly a mile distant from the park, and getting my directions from the driver, proceeded by myself to the house.

As I turned into the lane from the high-road, I saw a man, with a carpet-bag, walking before me rapidly on the way to the lodge. He was a little man, dressed in shabby black, and wearing a remarkably large hat. I set him down (as well as it was possible to judge) for a lawyer's clerk, and stopped at once to widen the distance between us. He had not heard me, and he walked on out of sight, without looking back. When I passed through the gates myself, a little while afterwards, he was not visible—he had evidently gone on to the house.

There were two women in the lodge. One of them was old, the other I knew at once, by Marian's description of her, to be Margaret Porcher.

I asked first if Sir Percival was at the Park, and receiving a reply in the negative, inquired next when he had left it. Neither of the women could tell me more than that he had gone away in the summer. I could extract nothing from Margaret Porcher but vacant smiles and shakings of the head. The old woman was a little more intelligent, and I managed to lead her into speaking of the manner of Sir Percival's departure, and of the alarm that it caused her. She remembered her master calling her out of bed, and remembered his frightening her by swearing—but the date at which the occurrence happened was, as she honestly acknowledged, "quite beyond her."

On leaving the lodge I saw the gardener at work not far off. When I first addressed him, he looked at me rather distrustfully, but on my using Mrs. Michelson's name, with a civil reference to himself, he entered into conversation readily enough. There is no need to describe what passed between us—it ended, as all my other attempts to discover the date had ended. The gardener knew that his master had driven away, at night, "some time in July, the last fortnight or the last ten days in the month"—and knew no more.

While we were speaking together I saw the man in black, with the large hat, come out from the house, and stand at some little distance observing us.

Certain suspicions of his errand at Blackwater Park had already crossed my mind. They were now increased by the gardener's inability (or unwillingness) to tell me who the man was, and I determined to clear the way before me, if possible, by speaking to him. The plainest question I could put as a stranger would be to inquire if the house was allowed to be shown to visitors. I walked up to the man at once, and accosted him in those words.

His look and manner unmistakably betrayed that he knew who I was, and that he wanted to irritate me into quarrelling with him. His reply was insolent enough to have answered the purpose, if I had been less determined to control myself. As it was, I met him with the most resolute politeness, apologised for my involuntary intrusion (which he called a "trespass,") and left the grounds. It was exactly as I suspected. The recognition of me when I left Mr. Kyrle's office had been evidently communicated to Sir Percival Glyde, and the man in black had been sent to the Park in anticipation of my making inquiries at the house or in the neighbourhood. If I had given him the least chance of lodging any sort of legal complaint against me, the interference of the local magistrate would no doubt have been turned to account as a clog on my proceedings, and a means of separating me from Marian and Laura for some days at least.

I was prepared to be watched on the way from Blackwater Park to the station, exactly as I had been watched in London the day before. But I could not discover at the time, whether I was really followed on this occasion or not. The man in black might have had means of tracking me at his disposal of which I was not aware, but I certainly saw nothing of him, in his own person, either on the way to the station, or afterwards on my arrival at the London terminus in the evening. I reached home on foot, taking the precaution, before I approached our own door, of walking round by the loneliest street in the neighbourhood, and there stopping and looking back more than once over the open space behind me. I had first learnt to use this stratagem against suspected treachery in the wilds of Central America—and now I was practising it again, with the same purpose and with even greater caution, in the heart of civilised London!

Nothing had happened to alarm Marian during my absence. She asked eagerly what success I had met with. When I told her she could not conceal her surprise at the indifference with which I spoke of the failure of my investigations thus far.

The truth was, that the ill-success of my inquiries had in no sense daunted me. I had pursued them as a matter of duty, and I had expected nothing from them. In the state of my mind at that time, it was almost a relief to me to know that the struggle was now narrowed to a trial of strength between myself and Sir Percival Glyde. The

vindictive motive had mingled itself all along with my other and better motives, and I confess it was a satisfaction to me to feel that the surest way, the only way left, of serving Laura's cause, was to fasten my hold firmly on the villain who had married her.

While I acknowledge that I was not strong enough to keep my motives above the reach of this instinct of revenge, I can honestly say something in my own favour on the other side. No base speculation on the future relations of Laura and myself, and on the private and personal concessions which I might force from Sir Percival if I once had him at my mercy, ever entered my mind. I never said to myself, "If I do succeed, it shall be one result of my success that I put it out of her husband's power to take her from me again." I could not look at her and think of the future with such thoughts as those. The sad sight of the change in her from her former self, made the one interest of my love an interest of tenderness and compassion which her father or her brother might have felt, and which I felt, God knows, in my inmost heart. All my hopes looked no farther on now than to the day of her recovery. There, till she was strong again and happy again—there, till she could look at me as she had once looked, and speak to me as she had once spoken—the future of my happiest thoughts and my dearest wishes ended.

These words are written under no prompting of idle self- contemplation. Passages in this narrative are soon to come which will set the minds of others in judgment on my conduct. It is right that the best and the worst of me should be fairly balanced before that time.

On the morning after my return from Hampshire I took Marian upstairs into my working-room, and there laid before her the plan that I had matured thus far, for mastering the one assailable point in the life of Sir Percival Glyde.

The way to the Secret lay through the mystery, hitherto impenetrable to all of us, of the woman in white. The approach to that in its turn might be gained by obtaining the assistance of Anne Catherick's mother, and the only ascertainable means of prevailing on Mrs. Catherick to act or to speak in the matter depended on the chance of my discovering local particulars and family particulars first of all from Mrs. Clements. After thinking the subject over carefully, I felt certain that I could only begin the new inquiries by placing myself in communication with the faithful friend and protectress of Anne Catherick.

The first difficulty then was to find Mrs. Clements.

I was indebted to Marian's quick perception for meeting this necessity at once by the best and simplest means. She proposed to write to the farm near Limmeridge

(Todd's Corner), to inquire whether Mrs. Clements had communicated with Mrs. Todd during the past few months. How Mrs. Clements had been separated from Anne it was impossible for us to say, but that separation once effected, it would certainly occur to Mrs. Clements to inquire after the missing woman in the neighbourhood of all others to which she was known to be most attached—the neighbourhood of Limmeridge. I saw directly that Marian's proposal offered us a prospect of success, and she wrote to Mrs. Todd accordingly by that day's post.

While we were waiting for the reply, I made myself master of all the information Marian could afford on the subject of Sir Percival's family, and of his early life. She could only speak on these topics from hearsay, but she was reasonably certain of the truth of what little she had to tell.

Sir Percival was an only child. His father, Sir Felix Glyde, had suffered from his birth under a painful and incurable deformity, and had shunned all society from his earliest years. His sole happiness was in the enjoyment of music, and he had married a lady with tastes similar to his own, who was said to be a most accomplished musician. He inherited the Blackwater property while still a young man. Neither he nor his wife after taking possession, made advances of any sort towards the society of the neighbourhood, and no one endeavoured to tempt them into abandoning their reserve, with the one disastrous exception of the rector of the parish.

The rector was the worst of all innocent mischief-makers—an over-zealous man. He had heard that Sir Felix had left College with the character of being little better than a revolutionist in politics and an infidel in religion, and he arrived conscientiously at the conclusion that it was his bounden duty to summon the lord of the manor to hear sound views enunciated in the parish church. Sir Felix fiercely resented the clergyman's well-meant but ill-directed interference, insulting him so grossly and so publicly, that the families in the neighbourhood sent letters of indignant remonstrance to the Park, and even the tenants of the Blackwater property expressed their opinion as strongly as they dared. The baronet, who had no country tastes of any kind, and no attachment to the estate or to any one living on it, declared that society at Blackwater should never have a second chance of annoying him, and left the place from that moment.

After a short residence in London he and his wife departed for the Continent, and never returned to England again. They lived part of the time in France and part in Germany—always keeping themselves in the strict retirement which the morbid sense of his own personal deformity had made a necessity to Sir Felix. Their son, Percival, had been born abroad, and had been educated there by private tutors. His mother was

the first of his parents whom he lost. His father had died a few years after her, either in 1825 or 1826. Sir Percival had been in England, as a young man, once or twice before that period, but his acquaintance with the late Mr. Fairlie did not begin till after the time of his father's death. They soon became very intimate, although Sir Percival was seldom, or never, at Limmeridge House in those days. Mr. Frederick Fairlie might have met him once or twice in Mr. Philip Fairlie's company, but he could have known little of him at that or at any other time. Sir Percival's only intimate friend in the Fairlie family had been Laura's father.

These were all the particulars that I could gain from Marian. They suggested nothing which was useful to my present purpose, but I noted them down carefully, in the event of their proving to be of importance at any future period.

Mrs. Todd's reply (addressed, by our own wish, to a post-office at some distance from us) had arrived at its destination when I went to apply for it. The chances, which had been all against us hitherto, turned from this moment in our favour. Mrs. Todd's letter contained the first item of information of which we were in search.

Mrs. Clements, it appeared, had (as we had conjectured) written to Todd's Corner, asking pardon in the first place for the abrupt manner in which she and Anne had left their friends at the farm-house (on the morning after I had met the woman in white in Limmeridge churchyard), and then informing Mrs. Todd of Anne's disappearance, and entreating that she would cause inquiries to be made in the neighbourhood, on the chance that the lost woman might have strayed back to Limmeridge. In making this request, Mrs. Clements had been careful to add to it the address at which she might always be heard of, and that address Mrs. Todd now transmitted to Marian. It was in London, and within half an hour's walk of our own lodging.

In the words of the proverb, I was resolved not to let the grass grow under my feet. The next morning I set forth to seek an interview with Mrs. Clements. This was my first step forward in the investigation. The story of the desperate attempt to which I now stood committed begins here.