



THE WOMAN
IN WHITE
WILKIE COLLINS



EPOCH THREE

The Story Continued by Walter Hartright, Part VIII

When I reached home again after my interview with Mrs. Clements, I was struck by the appearance of a change in Laura.

The unvarying gentleness and patience which long misfortune had tried so cruelly and had never conquered yet, seemed now to have suddenly failed her. Insensible to all Marian's attempts to soothe and amuse her, she sat, with her neglected drawing pushed away on the table, her eyes resolutely cast down, her fingers twining and untwining themselves restlessly in her lap. Marian rose when I came in, with a silent distress in her face, waited for a moment to see if Laura would look up at my approach, whispered to me, "Try if you can rouse her," and left the room.

I sat down in the vacant chair—gently unclasped the poor, worn, restless fingers, and took both her hands in mine.

"What are you thinking of, Laura? Tell me, my darling—try and tell me what it is."

She struggled with herself, and raised her eyes to mine. "I can't feel happy," she said, "I can't help thinking——" She stopped, bent forward a little, and laid her head on my shoulder, with a terrible mute helplessness that struck me to the heart.

"Try to tell me," I repeated gently; "try to tell me why you are not happy."

"I am so useless—I am such a burden on both of you," she answered, with a weary, hopeless sigh. "You work and get money, Walter, and Marian helps you. Why is there nothing I can do? You will end in liking Marian better than you like me—you will, because I am so helpless! Oh, don't, don't, don't treat me like a child!"

I raised her head, and smoothed away the tangled hair that fell over her face, and kissed her—my poor, faded flower! my lost, afflicted sister! "You shall help us, Laura," I said, "you shall begin, my darling, to-day."

She looked at me with a feverish eagerness, with a breathless interest, that made me tremble for the new life of hope which I had called into being by those few words.

I rose, and set her drawing materials in order, and placed them near her again.

“You know that I work and get money by drawing,” I said. “Now you have taken such pains, now you are so much improved, you shall begin to work and get money too. Try to finish this little sketch as nicely and prettily as you can. When it is done I will take it away with me, and the same person will buy it who buys all that I do. You shall keep your own earnings in your own purse, and Marian shall come to you to help us, as often as she comes to me. Think how useful you are going to make yourself to both of us, and you will soon be as happy, Laura, as the day is long.”

Her face grew eager, and brightened into a smile. In the moment while it lasted, in the moment when she again took up the pencils that had been laid aside, she almost looked like the Laura of past days.

I had rightly interpreted the first signs of a new growth and strength in her mind, unconsciously expressing themselves in the notice she had taken of the occupations which filled her sister’s life and mine. Marian (when I told her what had passed) saw, as I saw, that she was longing to assume her own little position of importance, to raise herself in her own estimation and in ours— and, from that day, we tenderly helped the new ambition which gave promise of the hopeful, happier future, that might now not be far off. Her drawings, as she finished them, or tried to finish them, were placed in my hands. Marian took them from me and hid them carefully, and I set aside a little weekly tribute from my earnings, to be offered to her as the price paid by strangers for the poor, faint, valueless sketches, of which I was the only purchaser. It was hard sometimes to maintain our innocent deception, when she proudly brought out her purse to contribute her share towards the expenses, and wondered with serious interest, whether I or she had earned the most that week. I have all those hidden drawings in my possession still—they are my treasures beyond price—the dear remembrances that I love to keep alive—the friends in past adversity that my heart will never part from, my tenderness never forget.

Am I trifling, here, with the necessities of my task? am I looking forward to the happier time which my narrative has not yet reached? Yes. Back again—back to the days of doubt and dread, when the spirit within me struggled hard for its life, in the icy stillness of perpetual suspense. I have paused and rested for a while on my forward course. It is not, perhaps, time wasted, if the friends who read these pages have paused and rested too.

I took the first opportunity I could find of speaking to Marian in private, and of communicating to her the result of the inquiries which I had made that morning. She

seemed to share the opinion on the subject of my proposed journey to Welmingham, which Mrs. Clements had already expressed to me.

“Surely, Walter,” she said, “you hardly know enough yet to give you any hope of claiming Mrs. Catherick’s confidence? Is it wise to proceed to these extremities, before you have really exhausted all safer and simpler means of attaining your object? When you told me that Sir Percival and the Count were the only two people in existence who knew the exact date of Laura’s journey, you forgot, and I forgot, that there was a third person who must surely know it—I mean Mrs. Rubelle. Would it not be far easier, and far less dangerous, to insist on a confession from her, than to force it from Sir Percival?”

“It might be easier,” I replied, “but we are not aware of the full extent of Mrs. Rubelle’s connivance and interest in the conspiracy, and we are therefore not certain that the date has been impressed on her mind, as it has been assuredly impressed on the minds of Sir Percival and the Count. It is too late, now, to waste the time on Mrs. Rubelle, which may be all-important to the discovery of the one assailable point in Sir Percival’s life? Are you thinking a little too seriously, Marian, of the risk I may run in returning to Hampshire? Are you beginning to doubt whether Sir Percival Glyde may not in the end be more than a match for me?”

“He will not be more than your match,” she replied decidedly, “because he will not be helped in resisting you by the impenetrable wickedness of the Count.”

“What has led you to that conclusion?” I replied, in some surprise.

“My own knowledge of Sir Percival’s obstinacy and impatience of the Count’s control,” she answered. “I believe he will insist on meeting you single-handed—just as he insisted at first on acting for himself at Blackwater Park. The time for suspecting the Count’s interference will be the time when you have Sir Percival at your mercy. His own interests will then be directly threatened, and he will act, Walter, to terrible purpose in his own defence.”

“We may deprive him of his weapons beforehand,” I said. “Some of the particulars I have heard from Mrs. Clements may yet be turned to account against him, and other means of strengthening the case may be at our disposal. There are passages in Mrs. Michelson’s narrative which show that the Count found it necessary to place himself in communication with Mr. Fairlie, and there may be circumstances which compromise him in that proceeding. While I am away, Marian, write to Mr. Fairlie and say that you want an answer describing exactly what passed between the Count and himself, and informing you also of any particulars that may have come to his knowledge at the same

time in connection with his niece. Tell him that the statement you request will, sooner or later, be insisted on, if he shows any reluctance to furnish you with it of his own accord.”

“The letter shall be written, Walter. But are you really determined to go to Welmingham?”

“Absolutely determined. I will devote the next two days to earning what we want for the week to come, and on the third day I go to Hampshire.”

When the third day came I was ready for my journey.

As it was possible that I might be absent for some little time, I arranged with Marian that we were to correspond every day—of course addressing each other by assumed names, for caution’s sake. As long as I heard from her regularly, I should assume that nothing was wrong. But if the morning came and brought me no letter, my return to London would take place, as a matter of course, by the first train. I contrived to reconcile Laura to my departure by telling her that I was going to the country to find new purchasers for her drawings and for mine, and I left her occupied and happy. Marian followed me downstairs to the street door.

“Remember what anxious hearts you leave here,” she whispered, as we stood together in the passage. “Remember all the hopes that hang on your safe return. If strange things happen to you on this journey—if you and Sir Percival meet——”

“What makes you think we shall meet?” I asked.

“I don’t know—I have fears and fancies that I cannot account for. Laugh at them, Walter, if you like—but, for God’s sake, keep your temper if you come in contact with that man!”

“Never fear, Marian! I answer for my self-control.”

With those words we parted.

I walked briskly to the station. There was a glow of hope in me. There was a growing conviction in my mind that my journey this time would not be taken in vain. It was a fine, clear, cold morning. My nerves were firmly strung, and I felt all the strength of my resolution stirring in me vigorously from head to foot.

As I crossed the railway platform, and looked right and left among the people congregated on it, to search for any faces among them that I knew, the doubt occurred to me whether it might not have been to my advantage if I had adopted a disguise before setting out for Hampshire. But there was something so repellent to me in the idea—something so meanly like the common herd of spies and informers in the mere act of adopting a disguise—that I dismissed the question from consideration almost as

soon as it had risen in my mind. Even as a mere matter of expediency the proceeding was doubtful in the extreme. If I tried the experiment at home the landlord of the house would sooner or later discover me, and would have his suspicions aroused immediately. If I tried it away from home the same persons might see me, by the commonest accident, with the disguise and without it, and I should in that way be inviting the notice and distrust which it was my most pressing interest to avoid. In my own character I had acted thus far—and in my own character I was resolved to continue to the end.

The train left me at Welmingham early in the afternoon.

Is there any wilderness of sand in the deserts of Arabia, is there any prospect of desolation among the ruins of Palestine, which can rival the repelling effect on the eye, and the depressing influence on the mind, of an English country town in the first stage of its existence, and in the transition state of its prosperity? I asked myself that question as I passed through the clean desolation, the neat ugliness, the prim torpor of the streets of Welmingham. And the tradesmen who stared after me from their lonely shops—the trees that drooped helpless in their arid exile of unfinished crescents and squares—the dead house- carcasses that waited in vain for the vivifying human element to animate them with the breath of life—every creature that I saw, every object that I passed, seemed to answer with one accord: The deserts of Arabia are innocent of our civilised desolation—the ruins of Palestine are incapable of our modern gloom!

I inquired my way to the quarter of the town in which Mrs. Catherick lived, and on reaching it found myself in a square of small houses, one story high. There was a bare little plot of grass in the middle, protected by a cheap wire fence. An elderly nursemaid and two children were standing in a corner of the enclosure, looking at a lean goat tethered to the grass. Two foot-passengers were talking together on one side of the pavement before the houses, and an idle little boy was leading an idle little dog along by a string on the other. I heard the dull tinkling of a piano at a distance, accompanied by the intermittent knocking of a hammer nearer at hand. These were all the sights and sounds of life that encountered me when I entered the square.

I walked at once to the door of Number Thirteen—the number of Mrs. Catherick's house—and knocked, without waiting to consider beforehand how I might best present myself when I got in. The first necessity was to see Mrs. Catherick. I could then judge, from my own observation, of the safest and easiest manner of approaching the object of my visit.

The door was opened by a melancholy middle-aged woman servant. I gave her my card, and asked if I could see Mrs. Catherick. The card was taken into the front parlour, and the servant returned with a message requesting me to mention what my business was.

“Say, if you please, that my business relates to Mrs. Catherick’s daughter,” I replied. This was the best pretext I could think of, on the spur of the moment, to account for my visit.

The servant again retired to the parlour, again returned, and this time begged me, with a look of gloomy amazement, to walk in.

I entered a little room, with a flaring paper of the largest pattern on the walls. Chairs, tables, cheffonier, and sofa, all gleamed with the glutinous brightness of cheap upholstery. On the largest table, in the middle of the room, stood a smart Bible, placed exactly in the centre on a red and yellow woollen mat and at the side of the table nearest to the window, with a little knitting-basket on her lap, and a wheezing, bleary-eyed old spaniel crouched at her feet, there sat an elderly woman, wearing a black net cap and a black silk gown, and having slate-coloured mittens on her hands. Her iron-grey hair hung in heavy bands on either side of her face—her dark eyes looked straight forward, with a hard, defiant, implacable stare. She had full square cheeks, a long, firm chin, and thick, sensual, colourless lips. Her figure was stout and sturdy, and her manner aggressively self-possessed. This was Mrs. Catherick.

“You have come to speak to me about my daughter,” she said, before I could utter a word on my side. “Be so good as to mention what you have to say.”

The tone of her voice was as hard, as defiant, as implacable as the expression of her eyes. She pointed to a chair, and looked me all over attentively, from head to foot, as I sat down in it. I saw that my only chance with this woman was to speak to her in her own tone, and to meet her, at the outset of our interview, on her own ground.

“You are aware,” I said, “that your daughter has been lost?”

“I am perfectly aware of it.”

“Have you felt any apprehension that the misfortune of her loss might be followed by the misfortune of her death?”

“Yes. Have you come here to tell me she is dead?”

“I have.”

“Why?”

She put that extraordinary question without the slightest change in her voice, her face, or her manner. She could not have appeared more perfectly unconcerned if I had told her of the death of the goat in the enclosure outside.

“Why?” I repeated. “Do you ask why I come here to tell you of your daughter’s death?”

“Yes. What interest have you in me, or in her? How do you come to know anything about my daughter?”

“In this way. I met her on the night when she escaped from the Asylum, and I assisted her in reaching a place of safety.”

“You did very wrong.”

“I am sorry to hear her mother say so.”

“Her mother does say so. How do you know she is dead?”

“I am not at liberty to say how I know it—but I DO know it.”

“Are you at liberty to say how you found out my address?”

“Certainly. I got your address from Mrs. Clements.”

“Mrs. Clements is a foolish woman. Did she tell you to come here?”

“She did not.”

“Then, I ask you again, why did you come?”

As she was determined to have her answer, I gave it to her in the plainest possible form.

“I came,” I said, “because I thought Anne Catherick’s mother might have some natural interest in knowing whether she was alive or dead.”

“Just so,” said Mrs. Catherick, with additional self-possession. “Had you no other motive?”

I hesitated. The right answer to that question was not easy to find at a moment’s notice.

“If you have no other motive,” she went on, deliberately taking off her slate-coloured mittens, and rolling them up, “I have only to thank you for your visit, and to say that I will not detain you here any longer. Your information would be more satisfactory if you were willing to explain how you became possessed of it. However, it justifies me, I suppose, in going into mourning. There is not much alteration necessary in my dress, as you see. When I have changed my mittens, I shall be all in black.”

She searched in the pocket of her gown, drew out a pair of black lace mittens, put them on with the stoniest and steadiest composure, and then quietly crossed her hands in her lap.

“I wish you good morning,” she said.

The cool contempt of her manner irritated me into directly avowing that the purpose of my visit had not been answered yet.

“I HAVE another motive in coming here,” I said.

“Ah! I thought so,” remarked Mrs. Catherick.

“Your daughter’s death——”

“What did she die of?”

“Of disease of the heart.”

“Yes. Go on.”

“Your daughter’s death has been made the pretext for inflicting serious injury on a person who is very dear to me. Two men have been concerned, to my certain knowledge, in doing that wrong. One of them is Sir Percival Glyde.”

“Indeed!”

I looked attentively to see if she flinched at the sudden mention of that name. Not a muscle of her stirred—the hard, defiant, implacable stare in her eyes never wavered for an instant.

“You may wonder,” I went on, “how the event of your daughter’s death can have been made the means of inflicting injury on another person.”

“No,” said Mrs. Catherick; “I don’t wonder at all. This appears to be your affair. You are interested in my affairs. I am not interested in yours.”

“You may ask, then,” I persisted, “why I mention the matter in your presence.”

“Yes, I DO ask that.”

“I mention it because I am determined to bring Sir Percival Glyde to account for the wickedness he has committed.”

“What have I to do with your determination?”

“You shall hear. There are certain events in Sir Percival’s past life which it is necessary for my purpose to be fully acquainted with. YOU know them—and for that reason I come to YOU.”

“What events do you mean?”

“Events that occurred at Old Welmingham when your husband was parish-clerk at that place, and before the time when your daughter was born.”

I had reached the woman at last through the barrier of impenetrable reserve that she had tried to set up between us. I saw her temper smouldering in her eyes—as plainly as I saw her hands grow restless, then unclasp themselves, and begin mechanically smoothing her dress over her knees.



“What do you know of those events?” she asked.

“All that Mrs. Clements could tell me,” I answered.

There was a momentary flush on her firm square face, a momentary stillness in her restless hands, which seemed to betoken a coming outburst of anger that might throw her off her guard. But no—she mastered the rising irritation, leaned back in her chair, crossed her arms on her broad bosom, and with a smile of grim sarcasm on her thick lips, looked at me as steadily as ever.

“Ah! I begin to understand it all now,” she said, her tamed and disciplined anger only expressing itself in the elaborate mockery of her tone and manner. “You have got a grudge of your own against Sir Percival Glyde, and I must help you to wreak it. I must tell you this, that, and the other about Sir Percival and myself, must I? Yes, indeed? You have been prying into my private affairs. You think you have found a lost woman to deal with, who lives here on sufferance, and who will do anything you ask for fear you may injure her in the opinions of the town’s-people. I see through you and your precious speculation—I do! and it amuses me. Ha! ha!”

She stopped for a moment, her arms tightened over her bosom, and she laughed to herself—a hard, harsh, angry laugh.

“You don’t know how I have lived in this place, and what I have done in this place, Mr. What’s-your-name,” she went on. “I’ll tell you, before I ring the bell and have you shown out. I came here a wronged woman—I came here robbed of my character and determined to claim it back. I’ve been years and years about it— and I HAVE claimed it back. I have matched the respectable people fairly and openly on their own ground. If they say anything against me now they must say it in secret—they can’t say it, they daren’t say it, openly. I stand high enough in this town to be out of your reach. THE CLERGYMAN BOWS TO ME. Aha! you didn’t bargain for that when you came here. Go to the church and inquire about me—you will find Mrs. Catherick has her sitting like the rest of them, and pays the rent on the day it’s due. Go to the town-hall. There’s a petition lying there—a petition of the respectable inhabitants against allowing a circus to come and perform here and corrupt our morals—yes! OUR morals. I signed that petition this morning. Go to the bookseller’s shop. The clergyman’s Wednesday evening Lectures on Justification by Faith are publishing there by subscription—I’m down on the list. The doctor’s wife only put a shilling in the plate at our last charity sermon—I put half-a-crown. Mr. Churchwarden Soward held the plate, and bowed to me. Ten years ago he told Pigrum the chemist I ought to be whipped out of the town at the cart’s tail. Is your mother alive? Has she got a better Bible on her table than I

have got on mine? Does she stand better with her trades-people than I do with mine? Has she always lived within her income? I have always lived within mine. Ah! there IS the clergyman coming along the square. Look, Mr. What's-your-name—look, if you please!”

She started up with the activity of a young woman, went to the window, waited till the clergyman passed, and bowed to him solemnly. The clergyman ceremoniously raised his hat, and walked on. Mrs. Catherick returned to her chair, and looked at me with a grimmer sarcasm than ever.

“There!” she said. “What do you think of that for a woman with a lost character? How does your speculation look now?”

The singular manner in which she had chosen to assert herself, the extraordinary practical vindication of her position in the town which she had just offered, had so perplexed me that I listened to her in silent surprise. I was not the less resolved, however, to make another effort to throw her off her guard. If the woman's fierce temper once got beyond her control, and once flamed out on me, she might yet say the words which would put the clue in my hands.

“How does your speculation look now?” she repeated.

“Exactly as it looked when I first came in,” I answered. “I don't doubt the position you have gained in the town, and I don't wish to assail it even if I could. I came here because Sir Percival Glyde is, to my certain knowledge, your enemy, as well as mine. If I have a grudge against him, you have a grudge against him too. You may deny it if you like, you may distrust me as much as you please, you may be as angry as you will—but, of all the women in England, you, if you have any sense of injury, are the woman who ought to help me to crush that man.”

“Crush him for yourself,” she said; “then come back here, and see what I say to you.”

She spoke those words as she had not spoken yet, quickly, fiercely, vindictively. I had stirred in its lair the serpent-hatred of years, but only for a moment. Like a lurking reptile it leaped up at me as she eagerly bent forward towards the place in which I was sitting. Like a lurking reptile it dropped out of sight again as she instantly resumed her former position in the chair.

“You won't trust me?” I said.

“No.”

“You are afraid?”

“Do I look as if I was?”

“You are afraid of Sir Percival Glyde?”

“Am I?”

Her colour was rising, and her hands were at work again smoothing her gown. I pressed the point farther and farther home, I went on without allowing her a moment of delay.

“Sir Percival has a high position in the world,” I said; “it would be no wonder if you were afraid of him. Sir Percival is a powerful man, a baronet, the possessor of a fine estate, the descendant of a great family——”

She amazed me beyond expression by suddenly bursting out laughing.

“Yes,” she repeated, in tones of the bitterest, steadiest contempt. “A baronet, the possessor of a fine estate, the descendant of a great family. Yes, indeed! A great family— especially by the mother’s side.”

There was no time to reflect on the words that had just escaped her, there was only time to feel that they were well worth thinking over the moment I left the house.

“I am not here to dispute with you about family questions,” I said. “I know nothing of Sir Percival’s mother——”

“And you know as little of Sir Percival himself,” she interposed sharply.

“I advise you not to be too sure of that,” I rejoined. “I know some things about him, and I suspect many more.”

“What do you suspect?”

“I’ll tell you what I DON’T suspect. I DON’T suspect him of being Anne’s father.”

She started to her feet, and came close up to me with a look of fury.

“How dare you talk to me about Anne’s father! How dare you say who was her father, or who wasn’t!” she broke out, her face quivering, her voice trembling with passion.

“The secret between you and Sir Percival is not THAT secret,” I persisted. “The mystery which darkens Sir Percival’s life was not born with your daughter’s birth, and has not died with your daughter’s death.”

She drew back a step. “Go!” she said, and pointed sternly to the door.

“There was no thought of the child in your heart or in his,’ I went on, determined to press her back to her last defences. “There was no bond of guilty love between you and him when you held those stolen meetings, when your husband found you whispering together under the vestry of the church.”

Her pointing hand instantly dropped to her side, and the deep flush of anger faded from her face while I spoke. I saw the change pass over her—I saw that hard, firm,

fearless, self-possessed woman quail under a terror which her utmost resolution was not strong enough to resist when I said those five last words, “the vestry of the church.”

For a minute or more we stood looking at each other in silence. I spoke first.

“Do you still refuse to trust me?” I asked.

She could not call the colour that had left it back to her face, but she had steadied her voice, she had recovered the defiant self-possession of her manner when she answered me.

“I do refuse,” she said.

“Do you still tell me to go?”

“Yes. Go—and never come back.”

I walked to the door, waited a moment before I opened it, and turned round to look at her again.

“I may have news to bring you of Sir Percival which you don’t expect,” I said, “and in that case I shall come back.”

“There is no news of Sir Percival that I don’t expect, except——”

She stopped, her pale face darkened, and she stole back with a quiet, stealthy, cat-like step to her chair.

“Except the news of his death,” she said, sitting down again, with the mockery of a smile just hovering on her cruel lips, and the furtive light of hatred lurking deep in her steady eyes.

As I opened the door of the room to go out, she looked round at me quickly. The cruel smile slowly widened her lips—she eyed me, with a strange stealthy interest, from head to foot—an unutterable expectation showed itself wickedly all over her face. Was she speculating, in the secrecy of her own heart, on my youth and strength, on the force of my sense of injury and the limits of my self-control, and was she considering the lengths to which they might carry me, if Sir Percival and I ever chanced to meet? The bare doubt that it might be so drove me from her presence, and silenced even the common forms of farewell on my lips. Without a word more, on my side or on hers, I left the room.

As I opened the outer door, I saw the same clergyman who had already passed the house once, about to pass it again, on his way back through the square. I waited on the door-step to let him go by, and looked round, as I did so, at the parlour window.

Mrs. Catherick had heard his footsteps approaching, in the silence of that lonely place, and she was on her feet at the window again, waiting for him. Not all the strength of all the terrible passions I had roused in that woman’s heart, could loosen



her desperate hold on the one fragment of social consideration which years of resolute effort had just dragged within her grasp. There she was again, not a minute after I had left her, placed purposely in a position which made it a matter of common courtesy on the part of the clergyman to bow to her for a second time. He raised his hat once more. I saw the hard ghastly face behind the window soften, and light up with gratified pride—I saw the head with the grim black cap bend ceremoniously in return. The clergyman had bowed to her, and in my presence, twice in one day!

