



THE WOMAN  
IN WHITE  
WILKIE COLLINS



EPOCH THREE

**The Story Continued by Walter Hartright, Part IX**

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I left the house, feeling that Mrs. Catherick had helped me a step forward, in spite of herself. Before I had reached the turning which led out of the square, my attention was suddenly aroused by the sound of a closing door behind me.

I looked round, and saw an undersized man in black on the door-step of a house, which, as well as I could judge, stood next to Mrs. Catherick's place of abode—next to it, on the side nearest to me. The man did not hesitate a moment about the direction he should take. He advanced rapidly towards the turning at which I had stopped. I recognised him as the lawyer's clerk, who had preceded me in my visit to Blackwater Park, and who had tried to pick a quarrel with me, when I asked him if I could see the house.

I waited where I was, to ascertain whether his object was to come to close quarters and speak on this occasion. To my surprise he passed on rapidly, without saying a word, without even looking up in my face as he went by. This was such a complete inversion of the course of proceeding which I had every reason to expect on his part, that my curiosity, or rather my suspicion, was aroused, and I determined on my side to keep him cautiously in view, and to discover what the business might be in which he was now employed. Without caring whether he saw me or not, I walked after him. He never looked back, and he led me straight through the streets to the railway station.

The train was on the point of starting, and two or three passengers who were late were clustering round the small opening through which the tickets were issued. I joined them, and distinctly heard the lawyer's clerk demand a ticket for the Blackwater station. I satisfied myself that he had actually left by the train before I came away.

There was only one interpretation that I could place on what I had just seen and heard. I had unquestionably observed the man leaving a house which closely adjoined Mrs. Catherick's residence. He had been probably placed there, by Sir Percival's directions, as a lodger, in anticipation of my inquiries leading me, sooner or later, to communicate with Mrs. Catherick. He had doubtless seen me go in and come out, and



he had hurried away by the first train to make his report at Blackwater Park, to which place Sir Percival would naturally betake himself (knowing what he evidently knew of my movements), in order to be ready on the spot, if I returned to Hampshire. Before many days were over, there seemed every likelihood now that he and I might meet.

Whatever result events might be destined to produce, I resolved to pursue my own course, straight to the end in view, without stopping or turning aside for Sir Percival or for any one. The great responsibility which weighed on me heavily in London—the responsibility of so guiding my slightest actions as to prevent them from leading accidentally to the discovery of Laura’s place of refuge—was removed, now that I was in Hampshire. I could go and come as I pleased at Welmingham, and if I chanced to fail in observing any necessary precautions, the immediate results, at least, would affect no one but myself.

When I left the station the winter evening was beginning to close in. There was little hope of continuing my inquiries after dark to any useful purpose in a neighbourhood that was strange to me. Accordingly, I made my way to the nearest hotel, and ordered my dinner and my bed. This done, I wrote to Marian, to tell her that I was safe and well, and that I had fair prospects of success. I had directed her, on leaving home, to address the first letter she wrote to me (the letter I expected to receive the next morning) to “The Post-Office, Welmingham,” and I now begged her to send her second day’s letter to the same address.

I could easily receive it by writing to the postmaster if I happened to be away from the town when it arrived.

The coffee-room of the hotel, as it grew late in the evening, became a perfect solitude. I was left to reflect on what I had accomplished that afternoon as uninterruptedly as if the house had been my own. Before I retired to rest I had attentively thought over my extraordinary interview with Mrs. Catherick from beginning to end, and had verified at my leisure the conclusions which I had hastily drawn in the earlier part of the day.

The vestry of Old Welmingham church was the starting-point from which my mind slowly worked its way back through all that I had heard Mrs. Catherick say, and through all I had seen Mrs. Catherick do.

At the time when the neighbourhood of the vestry was first referred to in my presence by Mrs. Clements, I had thought it the strangest and most unaccountable of all places for Sir Percival to select for a clandestine meeting with the clerk’s wife. Influenced by this impression, and by no other, I had mentioned “the vestry of the

church” before Mrs. Catherick on pure speculation—it represented one of the minor peculiarities of the story which occurred to me while I was speaking. I was prepared for her answering me confusedly or angrily, but the blank terror that seized her when I said the words took me completely by surprise. I had long before associated Sir Percival’s Secret with the concealment of a serious crime which Mrs. Catherick knew of, but I had gone no further than this. Now the woman’s paroxysm of terror associated the crime, either directly or indirectly, with the vestry, and convinced me that she had been more than the mere witness of it—she was also the accomplice, beyond a doubt.

What had been the nature of the crime? Surely there was a contemptible side to it, as well as a dangerous side, or Mrs. Catherick would not have repeated my own words, referring to Sir Percival’s rank and power, with such marked disdain as she had certainly displayed. It was a contemptible crime then and a dangerous crime, and she had shared in it, and it was associated with the vestry of the church.

The next consideration to be disposed of led me a step farther from this point.

Mrs. Catherick’s undisguised contempt for Sir Percival plainly extended to his mother as well. She had referred with the bitterest sarcasm to the great family he had descended from—”especially by the mother’s side.” What did this mean?

There appeared to be only two explanations of it. Either his mother’s birth had been low, or his mother’s reputation was damaged by some hidden flaw with which Mrs. Catherick and Sir Percival were both privately acquainted? I could only put the first explanation to the test by looking at the register of her marriage, and so ascertaining her maiden name and her parentage as a preliminary to further inquiries.

On the other hand, if the second case supposed were the true one, what had been the flaw in her reputation? Remembering the account which Marian had given me of Sir Percival’s father and mother, and of the suspiciously unsocial secluded life they had both led, I now asked myself whether it might not be possible that his mother had never been married at all. Here again the register might, by offering written evidence of the marriage, prove to me, at any rate, that this doubt had no foundation in truth. But where was the register to be found? At this point I took up the conclusions which I had previously formed, and the same mental process which had discovered the locality of the concealed crime, now lodged the register also in the vestry of Old Welmingham church.

These were the results of my interview with Mrs. Catherick—these were the various considerations, all steadily converging to one point, which decided the course of my proceedings on the next day.

The morning was cloudy and lowering, but no rain fell. I left my bag at the hotel to wait there till I called for it, and, after inquiring the way, set forth on foot for Old Welmingham church.

It was a walk of rather more than two miles, the ground rising slowly all the way.

On the highest point stood the church—an ancient, weather-beaten building, with heavy buttresses at its sides, and a clumsy square tower in front. The vestry at the back was built out from the church, and seemed to be of the same age. Round the building at intervals appeared the remains of the village which Mrs. Clements had described to me as her husband's place of abode in former years, and which the principal inhabitants had long since deserted for the new town. Some of the empty houses had been dismantled to their outer walls, some had been left to decay with time, and some were still inhabited by persons evidently of the poorest class. It was a dreary scene, and yet, in the worst aspect of its ruin, not so dreary as the modern town that I had just left. Here there was the brown, breezy sweep of surrounding fields for the eye to repose on—here the trees, leafless as they were, still varied the monotony of the prospect, and helped the mind to look forward to summer-time and shade.

As I moved away from the back of the church, and passed some of the dismantled cottages in search of a person who might direct me to the clerk, I saw two men saunter out after me from behind a wall. The tallest of the two—a stout muscular man in the dress of a gamekeeper—was a stranger to me. The other was one of the men who had followed me in London on the day when I left Mr. Kyrle's office. I had taken particular notice of him at the time; and I felt sure that I was not mistaken in identifying the fellow on this occasion.

Neither he nor his companion attempted to speak to me, and both kept themselves at a respectful distance, but the motive of their presence in the neighbourhood of the church was plainly apparent. It was exactly as I had supposed—Sir Percival was already prepared for me. My visit to Mrs. Catherick had been reported to him the evening before, and those two men had been placed on the look-out near the church in anticipation of my appearance at Old Welmingham. If I had wanted any further proof that my investigations had taken the right direction at last, the plan now adopted for watching me would have supplied it.

I walked on away from the church till I reached one of the inhabited houses, with a patch of kitchen garden attached to it on which a labourer was at work. He directed me to the clerk's abode, a cottage at some little distance off, standing by itself on the outskirts of the forsaken village. The clerk was indoors, and was just putting on his

greatcoat. He was a cheerful, familiar, loudly-talkative old man, with a very poor opinion (as I soon discovered) of the place in which he lived, and a happy sense of superiority to his neighbours in virtue of the great personal distinction of having once been in London.

“It’s well you came so early, sir,” said the old man, when I had mentioned the object of my visit. “I should have been away in ten minutes more. Parish business, sir, and a goodish long trot before it’s all done for a man at my age. But, bless you, I’m strong on my legs still! As long as a man don’t give at his legs, there’s a deal of work left in him. Don’t you think so yourself, sir?”

He took his keys down while he was talking from a hook behind the fireplace, and locked his cottage door behind us.

“Nobody at home to keep house for me,” said the clerk, with a cheerful sense of perfect freedom from all family encumbrances. “My wife’s in the churchyard there, and my children are all married. A wretched place this, isn’t it, sir? But the parish is a large one—every man couldn’t get through the business as I do. It’s learning does it, and I’ve had my share, and a little more. I can talk the Queen’s English (God bless the Queen!), and that’s more than most of the people about here can do. You’re from London, I suppose, sir? I’ve been in London a matter of five-and- twenty year ago. What’s the news there now, if you please?”

Chattering on in this way, he led me back to the vestry. I looked about to see if the two spies were still in sight. They were not visible anywhere. After having discovered my application to the clerk, they had probably concealed themselves where they could watch my next proceedings in perfect freedom.

The vestry door was of stout old oak, studded with strong nails, and the clerk put his large heavy key into the lock with the air of a man who knew that he had a difficulty to encounter, and who was not quite certain of creditably conquering it.

“I’m obliged to bring you this way, sir,” he said, “because the door from the vestry to the church is bolted on the vestry side. We might have got in through the church otherwise. This is a perverse lock, if ever there was one yet. It’s big enough for a prison-door—it’s been hampered over and over again, and it ought to be changed for a new one. I’ve mentioned that to the churchwarden fifty times over at least—he’s always saying, ‘I’ll see about it’—and he never does see. Ah, It’s a sort of lost corner, this place. Not like London—is it, sir? Bless you, we are all asleep here! We don’t march with the times.”

After some twisting and turning of the key, the heavy lock yielded, and he opened the door.

The vestry was larger than I should have supposed it to be, judging from the outside only. It was a dim, mouldy, melancholy old room, with a low, rafted ceiling. Round two sides of it, the sides nearest to the interior of the church, ran heavy wooden presses, worm-eaten and gaping with age. Hooked to the inner corner of one of these presses hung several surplices, all bulging out at their lower ends in an irreverent-looking bundle of limp drapery. Below the surplices, on the floor, stood three packing-cases, with the lids half off, half on, and the straw profusely bursting out of their cracks and crevices in every direction. Behind them, in a corner, was a litter of dusty papers, some large and rolled up like architects' plans, some loosely strung together on files like bills or letters. The room had once been lighted by a small side window, but this had been bricked up, and a lantern skylight was now substituted for it. The atmosphere of the place was heavy and mouldy, being rendered additionally oppressive by the closing of the door which led into the church. This door also was composed of solid oak, and was bolted at the top and bottom on the vestry side.

"We might be tidier, mightn't we, sir?" said the cheerful clerk; "but when you're in a lost corner of a place like this, what are you to do? Why, look here now, just look at these packing-cases. There they've been, for a year or more, ready to go down to London—there they are, littering the place, and there they'll stop as long as the nails hold them together. I'll tell you what, sir, as I said before, this is not London. We are all asleep here. Bless you, WE don't march with the times!"

"What is there in the packing-cases?" I asked.

"Bits of old wood carvings from the pulpit, and panels from the chancel, and images from the organ-loft," said the clerk. "Portraits of the twelve apostles in wood, and not a whole nose among 'em. All broken, and worm-eaten, and crumbling to dust at the edges. As brittle as crockery, sir, and as old as the church, if not older."

"And why were they going to London? To be repaired?"

"That's it, sir, to be repaired, and where they were past repair, to be copied in sound wood. But, bless you, the money fell short, and there they are, waiting for new subscriptions, and nobody to subscribe. It was all done a year ago, sir. Six gentlemen dined together about it, at the hotel in the new town. They made speeches, and passed resolutions, and put their names down, and printed off thousands of prospectuses. Beautiful prospectuses, sir, all flourished over with Gothic devices in red ink, saying it was a disgrace not to restore the church and repair the famous carvings, and so on.

There are the prospectuses that couldn't be distributed, and the architect's plans and estimates, and the whole correspondence which set everybody at loggerheads and ended in a dispute, all down together in that corner, behind the packing-cases. The money dribbled in a little at first—but what CAN you expect out of London? There was just enough, you know, to pack the broken carvings, and get the estimates, and pay the printer's bill, and after that there wasn't a halfpenny left. There the things are, as I said before. We have nowhere else to put them—nobody in the new town cares about accommodating us—we're in a lost corner—and this is an untidy vestry—and who's to help it?—that's what I want to know."

My anxiety to examine the register did not dispose me to offer much encouragement to the old man's talkativeness. I agreed with him that nobody could help the untidiness of the vestry, and then suggested that we should proceed to our business without more delay.

"Ay, ay, the marriage-register, to be sure," said the clerk, taking a little bunch of keys from his pocket. "How far do you want to look back, sir?"

Marian had informed me of Sir Percival's age at the time when we had spoken together of his marriage engagement with Laura. She had then described him as being forty-five years old. Calculating back from this, and making due allowance for the year that had passed since I had gained my information, I found that he must have been born in eighteen hundred and four, and that I might safely start on my search through the register from that date.

"I want to begin with the year eighteen hundred and four," I said.

"Which way after that, sir?" asked the clerk. "Forwards to our time or backwards away from us?"

"Backwards from eighteen hundred and four."

He opened the door of one of the presses—the press from the side of which the surplices were hanging—and produced a large volume bound in greasy brown leather. I was struck by the insecurity of the place in which the register was kept. The door of the press was warped and cracked with age, and the lock was of the smallest and commonest kind. I could have forced it easily with the walking-stick I carried in my hand.

"Is that considered a sufficiently secure place for the register?" I inquired. "Surely a book of such importance as this ought to be protected by a better lock, and kept carefully in an iron safe?"

“Well, now, that’s curious!” said the clerk, shutting up the book again, just after he had opened it, and smacking his hand cheerfully on the cover. “Those were the very words my old master was always saying years and years ago, when I was a lad. ‘Why isn’t the register’ (meaning this register here, under my hand)— ‘why isn’t it kept in an iron safe?’ If I’ve heard him say that once, I’ve heard him say it a hundred times. He was the solicitor in those days, sir, who had the appointment of vestry-clerk to this church. A fine hearty old gentleman, and the most particular man breathing. As long as he lived he kept a copy of this book in his office at Knowlesbury, and had it posted up regular, from time to time, to correspond with the fresh entries here. You would hardly think it, but he had his own appointed days, once or twice in every quarter, for riding over to this church on his old white pony, to check the copy, by the register, with his own eyes and hands. ‘How do I know?’ (he used to say) ‘how do I know that the register in this vestry may not be stolen or destroyed? Why isn’t it kept in an iron safe? Why can’t I make other people as careful as I am myself? Some of these days there will be an accident happen, and when the register’s lost, then the parish will find out the value of my copy.’ He used to take his pinch of snuff after that, and look about him as bold as a lord. Ah! the like of him for doing business isn’t easy to find now. You may go to London and not match him, even THERE. Which year did you say, sir? Eighteen hundred and what?”

“Eighteen hundred and four,” I replied, mentally resolving to give the old man no more opportunities of talking, until my examination of the register was over.

The clerk put on his spectacles, and turned over the leaves of the register, carefully wetting his finger and thumb at every third page. “There it is, sir,” said he, with another cheerful smack on the open volume. “There’s the year you want.”

As I was ignorant of the month in which Sir Percival was born, I began my backward search with the early part of the year. The register-book was of the old-fashioned kind, the entries being all made on blank pages in manuscript, and the divisions which separated them being indicated by ink lines drawn across the page at the close of each entry.

I reached the beginning of the year eighteen hundred and four without encountering the marriage, and then travelled back through December eighteen hundred and three— through November and October— through——

No! not through September also. Under the heading of that month in the year I found the marriage.



I looked carefully at the entry. It was at the bottom of a page, and was for want of room compressed into a smaller space than that occupied by the marriages above. The marriage immediately before it was impressed on my attention by the circumstance of the bridegroom's Christian name being the same as my own. The entry immediately following it (on the top of the next page) was noticeable in another way from the large space it occupied, the record in this case registering the marriages of two brothers at the same time. The register of the marriage of Sir Felix Glyde was in no respect remarkable except for the narrowness of the space into which it was compressed at the bottom of the page. The information about his wife was the usual information given in such cases. She was described as "Cecilia Jane Elster, of Park-View Cottages, Knowlesbury, only daughter of the late Patrick Elster, Esq., formerly of Bath."

I noted down these particulars in my pocket-book, feeling as I did so both doubtful and disheartened about my next proceedings. The Secret which I had believed until this moment to be within my grasp seemed now farther from my reach than ever.

What suggestions of any mystery unexplained had arisen out of my visit to the vestry? I saw no suggestions anywhere. What progress had I made towards discovering the suspected stain on the reputation of Sir Percival's mother? The one fact I had ascertained vindicated her reputation. Fresh doubts, fresh difficulties, fresh delays began to open before me in interminable prospect. What was I to do next? The one immediate resource left to me appeared to be this. I might institute inquiries about "Miss Elster of Knowlesbury," on the chance of advancing towards the main object of my investigation, by first discovering the secret of Mrs. Catherick's contempt for Sir Percival's mother.

"Have you found what you wanted, sir?" said the clerk, as I closed the register-book.

"Yes," I replied, "but I have some inquiries still to make. I suppose the clergyman who officiated here in the year eighteen hundred and three is no longer alive?"

"No, no, sir, he was dead three or four years before I came here, and that was as long ago as the year twenty-seven. I got this place, sir," persisted my talkative old friend, "through the clerk before me leaving it. They say he was driven out of house and home by his wife—and she's living still down in the new town there. I don't know the rights of the story myself—all I know is I got the place. Mr. Wansborough got it for me—the son of my old master that I was tell you of. He's a free pleasant gentleman as ever lived—rides to the hounds, keeps his pointers and all that. He's vestry-clerk here now as his father was before him."

“Did you not tell me your former master lived at Knowlesbury?” I asked, calling to mind the long story about the precise gentleman of the old school with which my talkative friend had wearied me before he opened the register-book.

“Yes, to be sure, sir,” replied the clerk. “Old Mr. Wansborough lived at Knowlesbury, and young Mr. Wansborough lives there too.”

“You said just now he was vestry-clerk, like his father before him. I am not quite sure that I know what a vestry-clerk is.”

“Don’t you indeed, sir?—and you come from London too! Every parish church, you know, has a vestry-clerk and a parish-clerk. The parish-clerk is a man like me (except that I’ve got a deal more learning than most of them—though I don’t boast of it). The vestry-clerk is a sort of an appointment that the lawyers get, and if there’s any business to be done for the vestry, why there they are to do it. It’s just the same in London. Every parish church there has got its vestry-clerk—and you may take my word for it he’s sure to be a lawyer.”

“Then young Mr. Wansborough is a lawyer, I suppose?”

“Of course he is, sir! A lawyer in High Street, Knowlesbury—the old offices that his father had before him. The number of times I’ve swept those offices out, and seen the old gentleman come trotting in to business on his white pony, looking right and left all down the street and nodding to everybody! Bless you, he was a popular character!—he’d have done in London!”

“How far is it to Knowlesbury from this place?”

“A long stretch, sir,” said the clerk, with that exaggerated idea of distances, and that vivid perception of difficulties in getting from place to place, which is peculiar to all country people. “Nigh on five mile, I can tell you!”

It was still early in the forenoon. There was plenty of time for a walk to Knowlesbury and back again to Welmingham; and there was no person probably in the town who was fitter to assist my inquiries about the character and position of Sir Percival’s mother before her marriage than the local solicitor. Resolving to go at once to Knowlesbury on foot, I led the way out of the vestry.

“Thank you kindly, sir,” said the clerk, as I slipped my little present into his hand. “Are you really going to walk all the way to Knowlesbury and back? Well! you’re strong on your legs, too—and what a blessing that is, isn’t it? There’s the road, you can’t miss it. I wish I was going your way—it’s pleasant to meet with gentlemen from London in a lost corner like this. One hears the news. Wish you good-morning, sir, and thank you kindly once more.”

We parted. As I left the church behind me I looked back, and there were the two men again on the road below, with a third in their company, that third person being the short man in black whom I had traced to the railway the evening before.

The three stood talking together for a little while, then separated. The man in black went away by himself towards Welmingham—the other two remained together, evidently waiting to follow me as soon as I walked on.

I proceeded on my way without letting the fellows see that I took any special notice of them. They caused me no conscious irritation of feeling at that moment—on the contrary, they rather revived my sinking hopes. In the surprise of discovering the evidence of the marriage, I had forgotten the inference I had drawn on first perceiving the men in the neighbourhood of the vestry. Their reappearance reminded me that Sir Percival had anticipated my visit to Old Welmingham church as the next result of my interview with Mrs. Catherick—otherwise he would never have placed his spies there to wait for me. Smoothly and fairly as appearances looked in the vestry, there was something wrong beneath them—there was something in the register-book, for aught I knew, that I had not discovered yet.