



THE WOMAN
IN WHITE
WILKIE COLLINS



EPOCH THREE
The Story Continued by Mrs. Catherick

SIR,—You have not come back, as you said you would. No matter—I know the news, and I write to tell you so. Did you see anything particular in my face when you left me? I was wondering, in my own mind, whether the day of his downfall had come at last, and whether you were the chosen instrument for working it. You were, and you HAVE worked it.

You were weak enough, as I have heard, to try and save his life. If you had succeeded, I should have looked upon you as my enemy. Now you have failed, I hold you as my friend. Your inquiries frightened him into the vestry by night—your inquiries, without your privity and against your will, have served the hatred and wreaked the vengeance of three-and-twenty years. Thank you, sir, in spite of yourself.

I owe something to the man who has done this. How can I pay my debt? If I was a young woman still I might say, “Come, put your arm round my waist, and kiss me, if you like.” I should have been fond enough of you even to go that length, and you would have accepted my invitation—you would, sir, twenty years ago! But I am an old woman now. Well! I can satisfy your curiosity, and pay my debt in that way. You HAD a great curiosity to know certain private affairs of mine when you came to see me—private affairs which all your sharpness could not look into without my help—private affairs which you have not discovered, even now. You SHALL discover them—your curiosity shall be satisfied. I will take any trouble to please you, my estimable young friend!

You were a little boy, I suppose, in the year twenty-seven? I was a handsome young woman at that time, living at Old Welmingham. I had a contemptible fool for a husband. I had also the honour of being acquainted (never mind how) with a certain gentleman (never mind whom). I shall not call him by his name. Why should I? It was not his own. He never had a name: you know that, by this time, as well as I do.

It will be more to the purpose to tell you how he worked himself into my good graces. I was born with the tastes of a lady, and he gratified them—in other words, he

admired me, and he made me presents. No woman can resist admiration and presents—especially presents, provided they happen to be just the thing she wants. He was sharp enough to know that—most men are. Naturally he wanted something in return—all men do. And what do you think was the something? The merest trifle. Nothing but the key of the vestry, and the key of the press inside it, when my husband's back was turned. Of course he lied when I asked him why he wished me to get him the keys in that private way. He might have saved himself the trouble—I didn't believe him. But I liked my presents, and I wanted more. So I got him the keys, without my husband's knowledge, and I watched him, without his own knowledge. Once, twice, four times I watched him, and the fourth time I found him out.

I was never over-scrupulous where other people's affairs were concerned, and I was not over-scrupulous about his adding one to the marriages in the register on his own account.

Of course I knew it was wrong, but it did no harm to me, which was one good reason for not making a fuss about it. And I had not got a gold watch and chain, which was another, still better—and he had promised me one from London only the day before, which was a third, best of all. If I had known what the law considered the crime to be, and how the law punished it, I should have taken proper care of myself, and have exposed him then and there. But I knew nothing, and I longed for the gold watch. All the conditions I insisted on were that he should take me into his confidence and tell me everything. I was as curious about his affairs then as you are about mine now. He granted my conditions—why, you will see presently.

This, put in short, is what I heard from him. He did not willingly tell me all that I tell you here. I drew some of it from him by persuasion and some of it by questions. I was determined to have all the truth, and I believe I got it.

He knew no more than any one else of what the state of things really was between his father and mother till after his mother's death. Then his father confessed it, and promised to do what he could for his son. He died having done nothing—not having even made a will. The son (who can blame him?) wisely provided for himself. He came to England at once, and took possession of the property. There was no one to suspect him, and no one to say him nay. His father and mother had always lived as man and wife—none of the few people who were acquainted with them ever supposed them to be anything else. The right person to claim the property (if the truth had been known) was a distant relation, who had no idea of ever getting it, and who was away at sea when his father died. He had no difficulty so far—he took possession, as a matter of

course. But he could not borrow money on the property as a matter of course. There were two things wanted of him before he could do this. One was a certificate of his birth, and the other was a certificate of his parents' marriage. The certificate of his birth was easily got—he was born abroad, and the certificate was there in due form. The other matter was a difficulty, and that difficulty brought him to Old Welmingham.

But for one consideration he might have gone to Knowlesbury instead.

His mother had been living there just before she met with his father—living under her maiden name, the truth being that she was really a married woman, married in Ireland, where her husband had ill-used her, and had afterwards gone off with some other person. I give you this fact on good authority—Sir Felix mentioned it to his son as the reason why he had not married. You may wonder why the son, knowing that his parents had met each other at Knowlesbury, did not play his first tricks with the register of that church, where it might have been fairly presumed his father and mother were married. The reason was that the clergyman who did duty at Knowlesbury church, in the year eighteen hundred and three (when, according to his birth certificate, his father and mother OUGHT to have been married), was alive still when he took possession of the property in the New Year of eighteen hundred and twenty-seven. This awkward circumstance forced him to extend his inquiries to our neighbourhood. There no such danger existed, the former clergyman at our church having been dead for some years.

Old Welmingham suited his purpose as well as Knowlesbury. His father had removed his mother from Knowlesbury, and had lived with her at a cottage on the river, a little distance from our village. People who had known his solitary ways when he was single did not wonder at his solitary ways when he was supposed to be married. If he had not been a hideous creature to look at, his retired life with the lady might have raised suspicions; but, as things were, his hiding his ugliness and his deformity in the strictest privacy surprised nobody. He lived in our neighbourhood till he came in possession of the Park. After three or four and twenty years had passed, who was to say (the clergyman being dead) that his marriage had not been as private as the rest of his life, and that it had not taken place at Old Welmingham church?

So, as I told you, the son found our neighbourhood the surest place he could choose to set things right secretly in his own interests. It may surprise you to hear that what he really did to the marriage register was done on the spur of the moment—done on second thoughts.

His first notion was only to tear the leaf out (in the right year and month), to destroy it privately, to go back to London, and to tell the lawyers to get him the

necessary certificate of his father's marriage, innocently referring them of course to the date on the leaf that was gone. Nobody could say his father and mother had NOT been married after that, and whether, under the circumstances, they would stretch a point or not about lending him the money (he thought they would), he had his answer ready at all events, if a question was ever raised about his right to the name and the estate.

But when he came to look privately at the register for himself, he found at the bottom of one of the pages for the year eighteen hundred and three a blank space left, seemingly through there being no room to make a long entry there, which was made instead at the top of the next page. The sight of this chance altered all his plans. It was an opportunity he had never hoped for, or thought of—and he took it—you know how. The blank space, to have exactly tallied with his birth certificate, ought to have occurred in the July part of the register. It occurred in the September part instead. However, in this case, if suspicious questions were asked, the answer was not hard to find. He had only to describe himself as a seven months' child.

I was fool enough, when he told me his story, to feel some interest and some pity for him—which was just what he calculated on, as you will see. I thought him hardly used. It was not his fault that his father and mother were not married, and it was not his father's and mother's fault either. A more scrupulous woman than I was—a woman who had not set her heart on a gold watch and chain—would have found some excuses for him. At all events, I held my tongue, and helped to screen what he was about.

He was some time getting the ink the right colour (mixing it over and over again in pots and bottles of mine), and some time afterwards in practising the handwriting. But he succeeded in the end, and made an honest woman of his mother after she was dead in her grave! So far, I don't deny that he behaved honourably enough to myself. He gave me my watch and chain, and spared no expense in buying them; both were of superior workmanship, and very expensive. I have got them still—the watch goes beautifully.

You said the other day that Mrs. Clements had told you everything she knew. In that case there is no need for me to write about the trumpery scandal by which I was the sufferer—the innocent sufferer, I positively assert. You must know as well as I do what the notion was which my husband took into his head when he found me and my fine-gentleman acquaintance meeting each other privately and talking secrets together. But what you don't know is how it ended between that same gentleman and myself. You shall read and see how he behaved to me.

The first words I said to him, when I saw the turn things had taken, were, “Do me justice—clear my character of a stain on it which you know I don’t deserve. I don’t want you to make a clean breast of it to my husband—only tell him, on your word of honour as a gentleman, that he is wrong, and that I am not to blame in the way he thinks I am. Do me that justice, at least, after all I have done for you.” He flatly refused, in so many words. He told me plainly that it was his interest to let my husband and all my neighbours believe the falsehood—because, as long as they did so they were quite certain never to suspect the truth. I had a spirit of my own, and I told him they should know the truth from my lips. His reply was short, and to the point. If I spoke, I was a lost woman, as certainly as he was a lost man.

Yes! it had come to that. He had deceived me about the risk I ran in helping him. He had practised on my ignorance, he had tempted me with his gifts, he had interested me with his story—and the result of it was that he made me his accomplice. He owned this coolly, and he ended by telling me, for the first time, what the frightful punishment really was for his offence, and for any one who helped him to commit it. In those days the law was not so tender-hearted as I hear it is now. Murderers were not the only people liable to be hanged, and women convicts were not treated like ladies in undeserved distress. I confess he frightened me—the mean impostor! the cowardly blackguard! Do you understand now how I hated him? Do you understand why I am taking all this trouble—thankfully taking it—to gratify the curiosity of the meritorious young gentleman who hunted him down?

Well, to go on. He was hardly fool enough to drive me to downright desperation. I was not the sort of woman whom it was quite safe to hunt into a corner—he knew that, and wisely quieted me with proposals for the future.

I deserved some reward (he was kind enough to say) for the service I had done him, and some compensation (he was so obliging as to add) for what I had suffered. He was quite willing—generous scoundrel!—to make me a handsome yearly allowance, payable quarterly, on two conditions. First, I was to hold my tongue—in my own interests as well as in his. Secondly, I was not to stir away from Welmingham without first letting him know, and waiting till I had obtained his permission. In my own neighbourhood, no virtuous female friends would tempt me into dangerous gossiping at the tea-table. In my own neighbourhood, he would always know where to find me. A hard condition, that second one—but I accepted it.

What else was I to do? I was left helpless, with the prospect of a coming incumbrance in the shape of a child. What else was I to do? Cast myself on the mercy

of my runaway idiot of a husband who had raised the scandal against me? I would have died first. Besides, the allowance WAS a handsome one. I had a better income, a better house over my head, better carpets on my floors, than half the women who turned up the whites of their eyes at the sight of me. The dress of Virtue, in our parts, was cotton print. I had silk.

So I accepted the conditions he offered me, and made the best of them, and fought my battle with my respectable neighbours on their own ground, and won it in course of time—as you saw yourself. How I kept his Secret (and mine) through all the years that have passed from that time to this, and whether my late daughter, Anne, ever really crept into my confidence, and got the keeping of the Secret too—are questions, I dare say, to which you are curious to find an answer. Well! my gratitude refuses you nothing. I will turn to a fresh page and give you the answer immediately. But you must excuse one thing—you must excuse my beginning, Mr. Hartright, with an expression of surprise at the interest which you appear to have felt in my late daughter. It is quite unaccountable to me. If that interest makes you anxious for any particulars of her early life, I must refer you to Mrs. Clements, who knows more of the subject than I do. Pray understand that I do not profess to have been at all over-fond of my late daughter. She was a worry to me from first to last, with the additional disadvantage of being always weak in the head. You like candour, and I hope this satisfies you.

There is no need to trouble you with many personal particulars relating to those past times. It will be enough to say that I observed the terms of the bargain on my side, and that I enjoyed my comfortable income in return, paid quarterly.

Now and then I got away and changed the scene for a short time, always asking leave of my lord and master first, and generally getting it. He was not, as I have already told you, fool enough to drive me too hard, and he could reasonably rely on my holding my tongue for my own sake, if not for his. One of my longest trips away from home was the trip I took to Limmeridge to nurse a half-sister there, who was dying. She was reported to have saved money, and I thought it as well (in case any accident happened to stop my allowance) to look after my own interests in that direction. As things turned out, however, my pains were all thrown away, and I got nothing, because nothing was to be had.

I had taken Anne to the north with me, having my whims and fancies, occasionally, about my child, and getting, at such times, jealous of Mrs. Clements' influence over her. I never liked Mrs. Clements. She was a poor, empty-headed, spiritless woman—what you call a born drudge—and I was now and then not averse to plaguing her by

taking Anne away. Not knowing what else to do with my girl while I was nursing in Cumberland, I put her to school at Limmeridge. The lady of the manor, Mrs. Fairlie (a remarkably plain-looking woman, who had entrapped one of the handsomest men in England into marrying her), amused me wonderfully by taking a violent fancy to my girl. The consequence was, she learnt nothing at school, and was petted and spoilt at Limmeridge House. Among other whims and fancies which they taught her there, they put some nonsense into her head about always wearing white. Hating white and liking colours myself, I determined to take the nonsense out of her head as soon as we got home again.

Strange to say, my daughter resolute]y resisted me. When she HAD got a notion once fixed in her mind she was, like other half-witted people, as obstinate as a mule in keeping it. We quarrelled finely, and Mrs. Clements, not liking to see it, I suppose, offered to take Anne away to live in London with her. I should have said Yes, if Mrs. Clements had not sided with my daughter about her dressing herself in white. But being determined she should NOT dress herself in white, and disliking Mrs. Clements more than ever for taking part against me, I said No, and meant No, and stuck to No. The consequence was, my daughter remained with me, and the consequence of that, in its turn, was the first serious quarrel that happened about the Secret.

The circumstance took place long after the time I have just been writing of. I had been settled for years in the new town, and was steadily living down my bad character and slowly gaining ground among the respectable inhabitants. It helped me forward greatly towards this object to have my daughter with me. Her harmlessness and her fancy for dressing in white excited a certain amount of sympathy. I left off opposing her favourite whim on that account, because some of the sympathy was sure, in course of time, to fall to my share. Some of it did fall. I date my getting a choice of the two best sittings to let in the church from that time, and I date the clergyman's first bow from my getting the sittings.

Well, being settled in this way, I received a letter one morning from that highly born gentleman (now deceased) in answer to one of mine, warning him, according to agreement, of my wishing to leave the town for a little change of air and scene.

The ruffianly side of him must have been uppermost, I suppose, when he got my letter, for he wrote back, refusing me in such abominably insolent language, that I lost all command over myself, and abused him, in my daughter's presence, as "a low impostor whom I could ruin for life if I chose to open my lips and let out his Secret." I said no more about him than that, being brought to my senses as soon as those words

had escaped me by the sight of my daughter's face looking eagerly and curiously at mine. I instantly ordered her out of the room until I had composed myself again.

My sensations were not pleasant, I can tell you, when I came to reflect on my own folly. Anne had been more than usually crazy and queer that year, and when I thought of the chance there might be of her repeating my words in the town, and mentioning HIS name in connection with them, if inquisitive people got hold of her, I was finely terrified at the possible consequences. My worst fears for myself, my worst dread of what he might do, led me no farther than this. I was quite unprepared for what really did happen only the next day.

On that next day, without any warning to me to expect him, he came to the house.

His first words, and the tone in which he spoke them, surly as it was, showed me plainly enough that he had repented already of his insolent answer to my application, and that he had come in a mighty bad temper to try and set matters right again before it was too late. Seeing my daughter in the room with me (I had been afraid to let her out of my sight after what had happened the day before) he ordered her away. They neither of them liked each other, and he vented the ill-temper on HER which he was afraid to show to ME.

“Leave us,” he said, looking at her over his shoulder. She looked back over HER shoulder and waited as if she didn't care to go. “Do you hear?” he roared out, “leave the room.” “Speak to me civilly,” says she, getting red in the face. “Turn the idiot out,” says he, looking my way. She had always had crazy notions of her own about her dignity, and that word “idiot “ upset her in a moment. Before I could interfere she stepped up to him in a fine passion. “Beg my pardon, directly,” says she, “or I'll make it the worse for you. I'll let out your Secret. I can ruin you for life if I choose to open my lips.” My own words!—repeated exactly from what I had said the day before—repeated, in his presence, as if they had come from herself. He sat speechless, as white as the paper I am writing on, while I pushed her out of the room. When he recovered himself——

No! I am too respectable a woman to mention what he said when he recovered himself. My pen is the pen of a member of the rector's congregation, and a subscriber to the “Wednesday Lectures on Justification by Faith”—how can you expect me to employ it in writing bad language? Suppose, for yourself, the raging, swearing frenzy of the lowest ruffian in England, and let us get on together, as fast as may be, to the way in which it all ended.



It ended, as you probably guess by this time, in his insisting on securing his own safety by shutting her up.

I tried to set things right. I told him that she had merely repeated, like a parrot, the words she had heard me say and that she knew no particulars whatever, because I had mentioned none. I explained that she had affected, out of crazy spite against him, to know what she really did NOT know—that she only wanted to threaten him and aggravate him for speaking to her as he had just spoken—and that my unlucky words gave her just the chance of doing mischief of which she was in search. I referred him to other queer ways of hers, and to his own experience of the vagaries of half-witted people—it was all to no purpose—he would not believe me on my oath—he was absolutely certain I had betrayed the whole Secret. In short, he would hear of nothing but shutting her up.

Under these circumstances, I did my duty as a mother. “No pauper Asylum,” I said, “I won’t have her put in a pauper Asylum. A Private Establishment, if you please. I have my feelings as a mother, and my character to preserve in the town, and I will submit to nothing but a Private Establishment, of the sort which my genteel neighbours would choose for afflicted relatives of their own.” Those were my words. It is gratifying to me to reflect that I did my duty. Though never overfond of my late daughter, I had a proper pride about her. No pauper stain—thanks to my firmness and resolution—ever rested on MY child.

Having carried my point (which I did the more easily, in consequence of the facilities offered by private Asylums), I could not refuse to admit that there were certain advantages gained by shutting her up. In the first place, she was taken excellent care of—being treated (as I took care to mention in the town) on the footing of a lady. In the second place, she was kept away from Welmingham, where she might have set people suspecting and inquiring, by repeating my own incautious words.

The only drawback of putting her under restraint was a very slight one. We merely turned her empty boast about knowing the Secret into a fixed delusion. Having first spoken in sheer crazy spitefulness against the man who had offended her, she was cunning enough to see that she had seriously frightened him, and sharp enough afterwards to discover that HE was concerned in shutting her up. The consequence was she flamed out into a perfect frenzy of passion against him, going to the Asylum, and the first words she said to the nurses, after they had quieted her, were, that she was put in confinement for knowing his Secret, and that she meant to open her lips and ruin him, when the right time came.

She may have said the same thing to you, when you thoughtlessly assisted her escape. She certainly said it (as I heard last summer) to the unfortunate woman who married our sweet-tempered, nameless gentleman lately deceased. If either you, or that unlucky lady, had questioned my daughter closely, and had insisted on her explaining what she really meant, you would have found her lose all her self-importance suddenly, and get vacant, and restless, and confused—you would have discovered that I am writing nothing here but the plain truth. She knew that there was a Secret—she knew who was connected with it—she knew who would suffer by its being known—and beyond that, whatever airs of importance she may have given herself, whatever crazy boasting she may have indulged in with strangers, she never to her dying day knew more.

Have I satisfied your curiosity? I have taken pains enough to satisfy it at any rate. There is really nothing else I have to tell you about myself or my daughter. My worst responsibilities, so far as she was concerned, were all over when she was secured in the Asylum. I had a form of letter relating to the circumstances under which she was shut up, given me to write, in answer to one Miss Halcombe, who was curious in the matter, and who must have heard plenty of lies about me from a certain tongue well accustomed to the telling of the same. And I did what I could afterwards to trace my runaway daughter, and prevent her from doing mischief by making inquiries myself in the neighbourhood where she was falsely reported to have been seen. But these, and other trifles like them, are of little or no interest to you after what you have heard already.

So far, I have written in the friendliest possible spirit. But I cannot close this letter without adding a word here of serious remonstrance and reproof, addressed to yourself.

In the course of your personal interview with me, you audaciously referred to my late daughter's parentage on the father's side, as if that parentage was a matter of doubt. This was highly improper and very ungentlemanlike on your part! If we see each other again, remember, if you please, that I will allow no liberties to be taken with my reputation, and that the moral atmosphere of Welmingham (to use a favourite expression of my friend the rector's) must not be tainted by loose conversation of any kind. If you allow yourself to doubt that my husband was Anne's father, you personally insult me in the grossest manner. If you have felt, and if you still continue to feel, an unhallowed curiosity on this subject, I recommend you, in your own interests, to check it at once, and for ever. On this side of the grave, Mr. Hartright, whatever may happen on the other, THAT curiosity will never be gratified.

Perhaps, after what I have just said, you will see the necessity of writing me an apology. Do so, and I will willingly receive it. I will, afterwards, if your wishes point to a second interview with me, go a step farther, and receive you. My circumstances only enable me to invite you to tea—not that they are at all altered for the worse by what has happened. I have always lived, as I think I told you, well within my income, and I have saved enough, in the last twenty years, to make me quite comfortable for the rest of my life. It is not my intention to leave Welmingham. There are one or two little advantages which I have still to gain in the town. The clergyman bows to me—as you saw. He is married, and his wife is not quite so civil. I propose to join the Dorcas Society, and I mean to make the clergyman's wife bow to me next.

If you favour me with your company, pray understand that the conversation must be entirely on general subjects. Any attempted reference to this letter will be quite useless—I am determined not to acknowledge having written it. The evidence has been destroyed in the fire, I know, but I think it desirable to err on the side of caution, nevertheless.

On this account no names are mentioned here, nor is any signature attached to these lines: the handwriting is disguised throughout, and I mean to deliver the letter myself, under circumstances which will prevent all fear of its being traced to my house. You can have no possible cause to complain of these precautions, seeing that they do not affect the information I here communicate, in consideration of the special indulgence which you have deserved at my hands. My hour for tea is half-past five, and my buttered toast waits for nobody.