



THE WOMAN  
IN WHITE  
WILKIE COLLINS



EPOCH THREE

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

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The last notes of the introduction to the opera were being played, and the seats in the pit were all filled, when Pesca and I reached the theatre.

There was plenty of room, however, in the passage that ran round the pit—precisely the position best calculated to answer the purpose for which I was attending the performance. I went first to the barrier separating us from the stalls, and looked for the Count in that part of the theatre. He was not there. Returning along the passage, on the left-hand side from the stage, and looking about me attentively, I discovered him in the pit. He occupied an excellent place, some twelve or fourteen seats from the end of a bench, within three rows of the stalls. I placed myself exactly on a line with him. Pesca standing by my side. The Professor was not yet aware of the purpose for which I had brought him to the theatre, and he was rather surprised that we did not move nearer to the stage.

The curtain rose, and the opera began.

Throughout the whole of the first act we remained in our position—the Count, absorbed by the orchestra and the stage, never casting so much as a chance glance at us. Not a note of Donizetti’s delicious music was lost on him. There he sat, high above his neighbours, smiling, and nodding his great head enjoyingly from time to time. When the people near him applauded the close of an air (as an English audience in such circumstances always WILL applaud), without the least consideration for the orchestral movement which immediately followed it, he looked round at them with an expression of compassionate remonstrance, and held up one hand with a gesture of polite entreaty. At the more refined passages of the singing, at the more delicate phases of the music, which passed unapplauded by others, his fat hands, adorned with perfectly-fitting black kid gloves, softly patted each other, in token of the cultivated appreciation of a musical man. At such times, his oily murmur of approval, “Bravo! Bra-a-a-a!” hummed through the silence, like the purring of a great cat. His immediate neighbours on either side—hearty, ruddy-faced people from the country, basking amazedly in the sunshine



of fashionable London—seeing and hearing him, began to follow his lead. Many a burst of applause from the pit that night started from the soft, comfortable patting of the black-gloved hands. The man’s voracious vanity devoured this implied tribute to his local and critical supremacy with an appearance of the highest relish. Smiles rippled continuously over his fat face. He looked about him, at the pauses in the music, serenely satisfied with himself and his fellow-creatures. “Yes! yes! these barbarous English people are learning something from ME. Here, there, and everywhere, I—Fosco—am an influence that is felt, a man who sits supreme!” If ever face spoke, his face spoke then, and that was its language.

The curtain fell on the first act, and the audience rose to look about them. This was the time I had waited for—the time to try if Pesca knew him.

He rose with the rest, and surveyed the occupants of the boxes grandly with his opera-glass. At first his back was towards us, but he turned round in time, to our side of the theatre, and looked at the boxes above us, using his glass for a few minutes— then removing it, but still continuing to look up. This was the moment I chose, when his full face was in view, for directing Pesca’s attention to him.

“Do you know that man?” I asked.

“Which man, my friend?”

“The tall, fat man, standing there, with his face towards us.”

Pesca raised himself on tiptoe, and looked at the Count.

“No,” said the Professor. “The big fat man is a stranger to me. Is he famous? Why do you point him out?”

“Because I have particular reasons for wishing to know something of him. He is a countryman of yours—his name is Count Fosco. Do you know that name?”

“Not I, Walter. Neither the name nor the man is known to me.”

“Are you quite sure you don’t recognise him? Look again—look carefully. I will tell you why I am so anxious about it when we leave the theatre. Stop! let me help you up here, where you can see him better.”

I helped the little man to perch himself on the edge of the raised dais upon which the pit-seats were all placed. His small stature was no hindrance to him—here he could see over the heads of the ladies who were seated near the outermost part of the bench.

A slim, light-haired man standing by us, whom I had not noticed before—a man with a scar on his left cheek—looked attentively at Pesca as I helped him up, and then looked still more attentively, following the direction of Pesca’s eyes, at the Count. Our

conversation might have reached his ears, and might, as it struck me, have roused his curiosity.

Meanwhile, Pesca fixed his eyes earnestly on the broad, full, smiling face turned a little upward, exactly opposite to him.

“No,” he said, “I have never set my two eyes on that big fat man before in all my life.”

As he spoke the Count looked downwards towards the boxes behind us on the pit tier.

The eyes of the two Italians met.

The instant before I had been perfectly satisfied, from his own reiterated assertion, that Pesca did not know the Count. The instant afterwards I was equally certain that the Count knew Pesca!

Knew him, and—more surprising still—FEARED him as well! There was no mistaking the change that passed over the villain’s face. The leaden hue that altered his yellow complexion in a moment, the sudden rigidity of all his features, the furtive scrutiny of his cold grey eyes, the motionless stillness of him from head to foot told their own tale. A mortal dread had mastered him body and soul—and his own recognition of Pesca was the cause of it!

The slim man with the scar on his cheek was still close by us. He had apparently drawn his inference from the effect produced on the Count by the sight of Pesca as I had drawn mine. He was a mild, gentlemanlike man, looking like a foreigner, and his interest in our proceedings was not expressed in anything approaching to an offensive manner.

For my own part I was so startled by the change in the Count’s face, so astounded at the entirely unexpected turn which events had taken, that I knew neither what to say or do next. Pesca roused me by stepping back to his former place at my side and speaking first.

“How the fat man stares!” he exclaimed. “Is it at ME?”

Am I famous? How can he know me when I don’t know him?”

I kept my eye still on the Count. I saw him move for the first time when Pesca moved, so as not to lose sight of the little man in the lower position in which he now stood. I was curious to see what would happen if Pesca’s attention under these circumstances was withdrawn from him, and I accordingly asked the Professor if he recognised any of his pupils that evening among the ladies in the boxes. Pesca

immediately raised the large opera-glass to his eyes, and moved it slowly all round the upper part of the theatre, searching for his pupils with the most conscientious scrutiny.

The moment he showed himself to be thus engaged the Count turned round, slipped past the persons who occupied seats on the farther side of him from where we stood, and disappeared in the middle passage down the centre of the pit. I caught Pesca by the arm, and to his inexpressible astonishment, hurried him round with me to the back of the pit to intercept the Count before he could get to the door. Somewhat to my surprise, the slim man hastened out before us, avoiding a stoppage caused by some people on our side of the pit leaving their places, by which Pesca and myself were delayed. When we reached the lobby the Count had disappeared, and the foreigner with the scar was gone too.

“Come home,” I said; “come home, Pesca to your lodgings. I must speak to you in private—I must speak directly.”

“My-soul-bless-my-soul!” cried the Professor, in a state of the extremest bewilderment. “What on earth is the matter?”

I walked on rapidly without answering. The circumstances under which the Count had left the theatre suggested to me that his extraordinary anxiety to escape Pesca might carry him to further extremities still. He might escape me, too, by leaving London. I doubted the future if I allowed him so much as a day’s freedom to act as he pleased. And I doubted that foreign stranger, who had got the start of us, and whom I suspected of intentionally following him out.

With this double distrust in my mind, I was not long in making Pesca understand what I wanted. As soon as we two were alone in his room, I increased his confusion and amazement a hundredfold by telling him what my purpose was as plainly and unreservedly as I have acknowledged it here.

“My friend, what can I do?” cried the Professor, piteously appealing to me with both hands. “Deuce-what-the-deuce! how can I help you, Walter, when I don’t know the man?”

“HE knows YOU—he is afraid of you—he has left the theatre to escape you. Pesca! there must be a reason for this. Look back into your own life before you came to England. You left Italy, as you have told me yourself, for political reasons. You have never mentioned those reasons to me, and I don’t inquire into them now. I only ask you to consult your own recollections, and to say if they suggest no past cause for the terror which the first sight of you produced in that man.”



To my unutterable surprise, these words, harmless as they appeared to ME, produced the same astounding effect on Pesca which the sight of Pesca had produced on the Count. The rosy face of my little friend whitened in an instant, and he drew back from me slowly, trembling from head to foot.

“Walter!” he said. “You don’t know what you ask.”

He spoke in a whisper—he looked at me as if I had suddenly revealed to him some hidden danger to both of us. In less than one minute of time he was so altered from the easy, lively, quaint little man of all my past experience, that if I had met him in the street, changed as I saw him now, I should most certainly not have known him again.

“Forgive me, if I have unintentionally pained and shocked you,” I replied. “Remember the cruel wrong my wife has suffered at Count Fosco’s hands. Remember that the wrong can never be redressed, unless the means are in my power of forcing him to do her justice. I spoke in HER interests, Pesca—I ask you again to forgive me—I can say no more.”

I rose to go. He stopped me before I reached the door.

“Wait,” he said. “You have shaken me from head to foot. You don’t know how I left my country, and why I left my country. Let me compose myself, let me think, if I can.”

I returned to my chair. He walked up and down the room, talking to himself incoherently in his own language. After several turns backwards and forwards, he suddenly came up to me, and laid his little hands with a strange tenderness and solemnity on my breast.

“On your heart and soul, Walter,” he said, “is there no other way to get to that man but the chance-way through ME?”

“There is no other way,” I answered.

He left me again, opened the door of the room and looked out cautiously into the passage, closed it once more, and came back.

“You won your right over me, Walter,” he said, “on the day when you saved my life. It was yours from that moment, when you pleased to take it. Take it now. Yes! I mean what I say. My next words, as true as the good God is above us, will put my life into your hands.”

The trembling earnestness with which he uttered this extraordinary warning, carried with it, to my mind, the conviction that he spoke the truth.

“Mind this!” he went on, shaking his hands at me in the vehemence of his agitation. “I hold no thread, in my own mind, between that man Fosco, and the past

time which I call back to me for your sake. If you find the thread, keep it to yourself—tell me nothing—on my knees I beg and pray, let me be ignorant, let me be innocent, let me be blind to all the future as I am now!”

He said a few words more, hesitatingly and disconnectedly, then stopped again.

I saw that the effort of expressing himself in English, on an occasion too serious to permit him the use of the quaint turns and phrases of his ordinary vocabulary, was painfully increasing the difficulty he had felt from the first in speaking to me at all. Having learnt to read and understand his native language (though not to speak it), in the earlier days of our intimate companionship, I now suggested to him that he should express himself in Italian, while I used English in putting any questions which might be necessary to my enlightenment. He accepted the proposal. In his smooth-flowing language, spoken with a vehement agitation which betrayed itself in the perpetual working of his features, in the wildness and the suddenness of his foreign gesticulations, but never in the raising of his voice, I now heard the words which armed me to meet the last struggle, that is left for this story to record. †

† It is only right to mention here, that I repeat Pesco’s statement to me with the careful suppressions and alterations which the serious nature of the subject and my own sense of duty to my friend demand. My first and last concealments from the reader are those which caution renders absolutely necessary in this portion of the narrative.

“You know nothing of my motive for leaving Italy,” he began, “except that it was for political reasons. If I had been driven to this country by the persecution of my government, I should not have kept those reasons a secret from you or from any one. I have concealed them because no government authority has pronounced the sentence of my exile. You have heard, Walter, of the political societies that are hidden in every great city on the continent of Europe? To one of those societies I belonged in Italy—and belong still in England. When I came to this country, I came by the direction of my chief. I was over-zealous in my younger time—I ran the risk of compromising myself and others. For those reasons I was ordered to emigrate to England and to wait. I emigrated—I have waited—I wait still. To-morrow I may be called away—ten years hence I may be called away. It is all one to me—I am here, I support myself by teaching, and I wait. I violate no oath (you shall hear why presently) in making my confidence complete by telling you the name of the society to which I belong. All I do is to put my life in your hands. If what I say to you now is ever known by others to have passed my lips, as certainly as we two sit here, I am a dead man.”

He whispered the next words in my ear. I keep the secret which he thus communicated. The society to which he belonged will be sufficiently individualised for the purpose of these pages, if I call it “The Brotherhood,” on the few occasions when any reference to the subject will be needed in this place.

“The object of the Brotherhood,” Pesca went on, “is, briefly, the object of other political societies of the same sort—the destruction of tyranny and the assertion of the rights of the people. The principles of the Brotherhood are two. So long as a man’s life is useful, or even harmless only, he has the right to enjoy it. But, if his life inflicts injury on the well-being of his fellow-men, from that moment he forfeits the right, and it is not only no crime, but a positive merit, to deprive him of it. It is not for me to say in what frightful circumstances of oppression and suffering this society took its rise. It is not for you to say—you Englishmen, who have conquered your freedom so long ago, that you have conveniently forgotten what blood you shed, and what extremities you proceeded to in the conquering—it is not for you to say how far the worst of all exasperations may, or may not, carry the maddened men of an enslaved nation. The iron that has entered into our souls has gone too deep for you to find it. Leave the refugee alone! Laugh at him, distrust him, open your eyes in wonder at that secret self which smoulders in him, sometimes under the every-day respectability and tranquillity of a man like me—sometimes under the grinding poverty, the fierce squalor, of men less lucky, less pliable, less patient than I am— but judge us not! In the time of your first Charles you might have done us justice—the long luxury of your own freedom has made you incapable of doing us justice now.

All the deepest feelings of his nature seemed to force themselves to the surface in those words—all his heart was poured out to me for the first time in our lives—but still his voice never rose, still his dread of the terrible revelation he was making to me never left him.

“So far,” he resumed, “you think the society like other societies. Its object (in your English opinion) is anarchy and revolution. It takes the life of a bad king or a bad minister, as if the one and the other were dangerous wild beasts to be shot at the first opportunity. I grant you this. But the laws of the Brotherhood are the laws of no other political society on the face of the earth. The members are not known to one another. There is a president in Italy; there are presidents abroad. Each of these has his secretary. The presidents and the secretaries know the members, but the members, among themselves, are all strangers, until their chiefs see fit, in the political necessity of the time, or in the private necessity of the society, to make them known to each other. With

such a safeguard as this there is no oath among us on admittance. We are identified with the Brotherhood by a secret mark, which we all bear, which lasts while our lives last. We are told to go about our ordinary business, and to report ourselves to the president, or the secretary, four times a year, in the event of our services being required. We are warned, if we betray the Brotherhood, or if we injure it by serving other interests, that we die by the principles of the Brotherhood—die by the hand of a stranger who may be sent from the other end of the world to strike the blow—or by the hand of our own bosom-friend, who may have been a member unknown to us through all the years of our intimacy. Sometimes the death is delayed—sometimes it follows close on the treachery. It is our first business to know how to wait—our second business to know how to obey when the word is spoken. Some of us may wait our lives through, and may not be wanted. Some of us may be called to the work, or to the preparation for the work, the very day of our admission. I myself—the little, easy, cheerful man you know, who, of his own accord, would hardly lift up his handkerchief to strike down the fly that buzzes about his face—I, in my younger time, under provocation so dreadful that I will not tell you of it, entered the Brotherhood by an impulse, as I might have killed myself by an impulse. I must remain in it now—it has got me, whatever I may think of it in my better circumstances and my cooler manhood, to my dying day. While I was still in Italy I was chosen secretary, and all the members of that time, who were brought face to face with my president, were brought face to face also with me.”

I began to understand him—I saw the end towards which his extraordinary disclosure was now tending. He waited a moment, watching me earnestly—watching till he had evidently guessed what was passing in my mind before he resumed.

“You have drawn your own conclusion already,” he said. “I see it in your face. Tell me nothing—keep me out of the secret of your thoughts. Let me make my one last sacrifice of myself, for your sake, and then have done with this subject, never to return to it again.”

He signed to me not to answer him—rose—removed his coat—and rolled up the shirt-sleeve on his left arm.

“I promised you that this confidence should be complete,” he whispered, speaking close at my ear, with his eyes looking watchfully at the door. “Whatever comes of it you shall not reproach me with having hidden anything from you which it was necessary to your interests to know. I have said that the Brotherhood identifies its members by a mark that lasts for life. See the place, and the mark on it for yourself.”





He raised his bare arm, and showed me, high on the upper part of it and in the inner side, a brand deeply burnt in the flesh and stained of a bright blood-red colour. I abstain from describing the device which the brand represented. It will be sufficient to say that it was circular in form, and so small that it would have been completely covered by a shilling coin.

“A man who has this mark, branded in this place,” he said, covering his arm again, “is a member of the Brotherhood. A man who has been false to the Brotherhood is discovered sooner or later by the chiefs who know him—presidents or secretaries, as the case may be. And a man discovered by the chiefs is dead. NO HUMAN LAWS CAN PROTECT HIM. Remember what you have seen and heard—draw what conclusions YOU like—act as you please. But, in the name of God, whatever you discover, whatever you do, tell me nothing! Let me remain free from a responsibility which it horrifies me to think of—which I know, in my conscience, is not my responsibility now. For the last time I say it—on my honour as a gentleman, on my oath as a Christian, if the man you pointed out at the Opera knows ME, he is so altered, or so disguised, that I do not know him. I am ignorant of his proceedings or his purposes in England. I never saw him, I never heard the name he goes by, to my knowledge, before to-night. I say no more. Leave me a little, Walter. I am overpowered by what has happened—I am shaken by what I have said. Let me try to be like myself again when we meet next.

He dropped into a chair, and turning away from me, hid his face in his hands. I gently opened the door so as not to disturb him, and spoke my few parting words in low tones, which he might hear or not, as he pleased.

“I will keep the memory of to-night in my heart of hearts,” I said. “You shall never repent the trust you have reposed in me. May I come to you to-morrow? May I come as early as nine o’clock?”

“Yes, Walter,” he replied, looking up at me kindly, and speaking in English once more, as if his one anxiety now was to get back to our former relations towards each other. “Come to my little bit of breakfast before I go my ways among the pupils that I teach.”

“Good-night, Pesca.”

“Good-night, my friend.”

