



THE WOMAN
IN WHITE
WILKIE COLLINS



EPOCH THREE

The Story Continued by Walter Hartright, Part VI

MY first conviction as soon as I found myself outside the house, was that no alternative was left me but to act at once on the information I had received—to make sure of the Count that night, or to risk the loss, if I only delayed till the morning, of Laura's last chance. I looked at my watch—it was ten o'clock.

Not the shadow of a doubt crossed my mind of the purpose for which the Count had left the theatre. His escape from us, that evening, was beyond all question the preliminary only to his escape from London. The mark of the Brotherhood was on his arm—I felt as certain of it as if he had shown me the brand; and the betrayal of the Brotherhood was on his conscience—I had seen it in his recognition of Pesca.

It was easy to understand why that recognition had not been mutual. A man of the Count's character would never risk the terrible consequences of turning spy without looking to his personal security quite as carefully as he looked to his golden reward. The shaven face, which I had pointed out at the Opera, might have been covered by a beard in Pesca's time—his dark brown hair might be a wig—his name was evidently a false one. The accident of time might have helped him as well—his immense corpulence might have come with his later years. There was every reason why Pesca should not have known him again—every reason also why he should have known Pesca, whose singular personal appearance made a marked man of him, go where he might.

I have said that I felt certain of the purpose in the Count's mind when he escaped us at the theatre. How could I doubt it, when I saw, with my own eyes, that he believed himself, in spite of the change in his appearance, to have been recognised by Pesca, and to be therefore in danger of his life? If I could get speech of him that night, if I could show him that I, too knew of the mortal peril in which he stood, what result would follow? Plainly this. One of us must be master of the situation—one of us must inevitably be at the mercy of the other.



I owed it to myself to consider the chances against me before I confronted them. I owed it to my wife to do all that lay in my power to lessen the risk.

The chances against me wanted no reckoning up—they were all merged in one. If the Count discovered, by my own avowal, that the direct way to his safety lay through my life, he was probably the last man in existence who would shrink from throwing me off my guard and taking that way, when he had me alone within his reach. The only means of defence against him on which I could at all rely to lessen the risk, presented themselves, after a little careful thinking, clearly enough. Before I made any personal acknowledgment of my discovery in his presence, I must place the discovery itself where it would be ready for instant use against him, and safe from any attempt at suppression on his part. If I laid the mine under his feet before I approached him, and if I left instructions with a third person to fire it on the expiration of a certain time, unless directions to the contrary were previously received under my own hand, or from my own lips—in that event the Count's security was absolutely dependent upon mine, and I might hold the vantage ground over him securely, even in his own house.

This idea occurred to me when I was close to the new lodgings which we had taken on returning from the sea-side. I went in without disturbing any one, by the help of my key. A light was in the hall, and I stole up with it to my workroom to make my preparations, and absolutely to commit myself to an interview with the Count, before either Laura or Marian could have the slightest suspicion of what I intended to do.

A letter addressed to Pesca represented the surest measure of precaution which it was now possible for me to take. I wrote as follows—

“The man whom I pointed out to you at the Opera is a member of the Brotherhood, and has been false to his trust. Put both these assertions to the test instantly. You know the name he goes by in England. His address is No. 5 Forest Road, St. John's Wood. On the love you once bore me, use the power entrusted to you without mercy and without delay against that man. I have risked all and lost all—and the forfeit of my failure has been paid with my life.”

I signed and dated these lines, enclosed them in an envelope, and sealed it up. On the outside I wrote this direction: “Keep the enclosure unopened until nine o'clock to-morrow morning. If you do not hear from me, or see me, before that time, break the seal when the clock strikes, and read the contents.” I added my initials, and protected the whole by enclosing it in a second sealed envelope, addressed to Pesca at his lodgings.

Nothing remained to be done after this but to find the means of sending my letter to its destination immediately. I should then have accomplished all that lay in my power. If anything happened to me in the Count's house, I had now provided for his answering it with his life.

That the means of preventing his escape, under any circumstances whatever, were at Pesca's disposal, if he chose to exert them, I did not for an instant doubt. The extraordinary anxiety which he had expressed to remain unenlightened as to the Count's identity— or, in other words, to be left uncertain enough about facts to justify him to his own conscience in remaining passive—betrayed plainly that the means of exercising the terrible justice of the Brotherhood were ready to his hand, although, as a naturally humane man, he had shrunk from plainly saying as much in my presence. The deadly certainty with which the vengeance of foreign political societies can hunt down a traitor to the cause, hide himself where he may, had been too often exemplified, even in my superficial experience, to allow of any doubt. Considering the subject only as a reader of newspapers, cases recurred to my memory, both in London and in Paris, of foreigners found stabbed in the streets, whose assassins could never be traced—of bodies and parts of bodies thrown into the Thames and the Seine, by hands that could never be discovered—of deaths by secret violence which could only be accounted for in one way. I have disguised nothing relating to myself in these pages, and I do not disguise here that I believed I had written Count Fosco's death-warrant, if the fatal emergency happened which authorised Pesca to open my enclosure.

I left my room to go down to the ground floor of the house, and speak to the landlord about finding me a messenger. He happened to be ascending the stairs at the time, and we met on the landing. His son, a quick lad, was the messenger he proposed to me on hearing what I wanted. We had the boy upstairs, and I gave him his directions. He was to take the letter in a cab, to put it into Professor Pesca's own hands, and to bring me back a line of acknowledgment from that gentleman—returning in the cab, and keeping it at the door for my use. It was then nearly half-past ten. I calculated that the boy might be back in twenty minutes, and that I might drive to St. John's Wood, on his return, in twenty minutes more.

When the lad had departed on his errand I returned to my own room for a little while, to put certain papers in order, so that they might be easily found in case of the worst. The key of the old-fashioned bureau in which the papers were kept I sealed up, and left it on my table, with Marian's name written on the outside of the little packet. This done, I went down-stairs to the sitting-room, in which I expected to find Laura

and Marian awaiting my return from the Opera. I felt my hand trembling for the first time when I laid it on the lock of the door.

No one was in the room but Marian. She was reading, and she looked at her watch, in surprise, when I came in.

“How early you are back!” she said. “You must have come away before the Opera was over.”

“Yes,” I replied, “neither Pesca nor I waited for the end. Where is Laura?”

“She had one of her bad headaches this evening, and I advised her to go to bed when we had done tea.”

I left the room again on the pretext of wishing to see whether Laura was asleep. Marian’s quick eyes were beginning to look inquiringly at my face—Marian’s quick instinct was beginning to discover that I had something weighing on my mind.

When I entered the bedchamber, and softly approached the bedside by the dim flicker of the night-lamp, my wife was asleep.

We had not been married quite a month yet. If my heart was heavy, if my resolution for a moment faltered again, when I looked at her face turned faithfully to my pillow in her sleep—when I saw her hand resting open on the coverlid, as if it was waiting unconsciously for mine—surely there was some excuse for me? I only allowed myself a few minutes to kneel down at the bedside, and to look close at her—so close that her breath, as it came and went, fluttered on my face. I only touched her hand and her cheek with my lips at parting. She stirred in her sleep and murmured my name, but without waking. I lingered for an instant at the door to look at her again. “God bless and keep you, my darling!” I whispered, and left her.

Marian was at the stairhead waiting for me. She had a folded slip of paper in her hand.

“The landlord’s son has brought this for you,” she said. “He has got a cab at the door—he says you ordered him to keep it at your disposal.”

“Quite right, Marian. I want the cab—I am going out again.”

I descended the stairs as I spoke, and looked into the sitting-room to read the slip of paper by the light on the table. It contained these two sentences in Pesca’s handwriting—

“Your letter is received. If I don’t see you before the time you mention, I will break the seal when the clock strikes.”

I placed the paper in my pocket-book, and made for the door. Marian met me on the threshold, and pushed me back into the room, where the candle-light fell full on my face. She held me by both hands, and her eyes fastened searchingly on mine.

“I see!” she said, in a low eager whisper. “You are trying the last chance to-night.”

“Yes, the last chance and the best,” I whispered back.

“Not alone! Oh, Walter, for God’s sake, not alone! Let me go with you. Don’t refuse me because I’m only a woman. I must go! I will go! I’ll wait outside in the cab!”

It was my turn now to hold HER. She tried to break away from me and get down first to the door.

“If you want to help me,” I said, “stop here and sleep in my wife’s room to-night. Only let me go away with my mind easy about Laura, and I answer for everything else. Come, Marian, give me a kiss, and show that you have the courage to wait till I come back.”

I dared not allow her time to say a word more. She tried to hold me again. I unclasped her hands, and was out of the room in a moment. The boy below heard me on the stairs, and opened the hall-door. I jumped into the cab before the driver could get off the box. “Forest Road, St. John’s Wood,” I called to him through the front window. “Double fare if you get there in a quarter of an hour.” “I’ll do it, sir.” I looked at my watch. Eleven o’clock. Not a minute to lose.

The rapid motion of the cab, the sense that every instant now was bringing me nearer to the Count, the conviction that I was embarked at last, without let or hindrance, on my hazardous enterprise, heated me into such a fever of excitement that I shouted to the man to go faster and faster. As we left the streets, and crossed St. John’s Wood Road, my impatience so completely overpowered me that I stood up in the cab and stretched my head out of the window, to see the end of the journey before we reached it. Just as a church clock in the distance struck the quarter past, we turned into the Forest Road. I stopped the driver a little away from the Count’s house, paid and dismissed him, and walked on to the door.

As I approached the garden gate, I saw another person advancing towards it also from the direction opposite to mine. We met under the gas lamp in the road, and looked at each other. I instantly recognised the light-haired foreigner with the scar on his cheek, and I thought he recognised me. He said nothing, and instead of stopping at the house, as I did, he slowly walked on. Was he in the Forest Road by accident? Or had he followed the Count home from the Opera?

I did not pursue those questions. After waiting a little till the foreigner had slowly passed out of sight, I rang the gate bell. It was then twenty minutes past eleven—late enough to make it quite easy for the Count to get rid of me by the excuse that he was in bed.

The only way of providing against this contingency was to send in my name without asking any preliminary questions, and to let him know, at the same time, that I had a serious motive for wishing to see him at that late hour. Accordingly, while I was waiting, I took out my card and wrote under my name “On important business.” The maid-servant answered the door while I was writing the last word in pencil, and asked me distrustfully what I “pleased to want.”

“Be so good as to take that to your master,” I replied, giving her the card.

I saw, by the girl’s hesitation of manner, that if I had asked for the Count in the first instance she would only have followed her instructions by telling me he was not at home. She was staggered by the confidence with which I gave her the card. After staring at me, in great perturbation, she went back into the house with my message, closing the door, and leaving me to wait in the garden.

In a minute or so she reappeared. “Her master’s compliments, and would I be so obliging as to say what my business was?” “Take my compliments back,” I replied, “and say that the business cannot be mentioned to any one but your master.” She left me again, again returned, and this time asked me to walk in.

I followed her at once. In another moment I was inside the Count’s house.