



THE WOMAN
IN WHITE
WILKIE COLLINS



EPOCH THREE

The Story Continued by Walter Hartright, Part VII

There was no lamp in the hall, but by the dim light of the kitchen candle, which the girl had brought upstairs with her, I saw an elderly lady steal noiselessly out of a back room on the ground floor. She cast one viperish look at me as I entered the hall, but said nothing, and went slowly upstairs without returning my bow. My familiarity with Marian's journal sufficiently assured me that the elderly lady was Madame Fosco.

The servant led me to the room which the Countess had just left. I entered it, and found myself face to face with the Count.

He was still in his evening dress, except his coat, which he had thrown across a chair. His shirt-sleeves were turned up at the wrists, but no higher. A carpet-bag was on one side of him, and a box on the other. Books, papers, and articles of wearing apparel were scattered about the room. On a table, at one side of the door, stood the cage, so well known to me by description, which contained his white mice. The canaries and the cockatoo were probably in some other room. He was seated before the box, packing it, when I went in, and rose with some papers in his hand to receive me. His face still betrayed plain traces of the shock that had overwhelmed him at the Opera. His fat cheeks hung loose, his cold grey eyes were furtively vigilant, his voice, look, and manner were all sharply suspicious alike, as he advanced a step to meet me, and requested, with distant civility, that I would take a chair.

"You come here on business, sir?" he said. "I am at a loss to know what that business can possibly be."

The unconcealed curiosity, with which he looked hard in my face while he spoke, convinced me that I had passed unnoticed by him at the Opera. He had seen Pesca first, and from that moment till he left the theatre he had evidently seen nothing else. My name would necessarily suggest to him that I had not come into his house with other than a hostile purpose towards himself, but he appeared to be utterly ignorant thus far of the real nature of my errand.

“I am fortunate in finding you here to-night,” I said. “You seem to be on the point of taking a journey?”

“Is your business connected with my journey?”

“In some degree.”

“In what degree? Do you know where I am going to?”

“No. I only know why you are leaving London.”

He slipped by me with the quickness of thought, locked the door, and put the key in his pocket.

“You and I, Mr. Hartright, are excellently well acquainted with one another by reputation,” he said. “Did it, by any chance, occur to you when you came to this house that I was not the sort of man you could trifle with?”

“It did occur to me,” I replied. “And I have not come to trifle with you. I am here on a matter of life and death, and if that door which you have locked was open at this moment, nothing you could say or do would induce me to pass through it.”

I walked farther into the room, and stood opposite to him on the rug before the fireplace. He drew a chair in front of the door, and sat down on it, with his left arm resting on the table. The cage with the white mice was close to him, and the little creatures scampered out of their sleeping-place as his heavy arm shook the table, and peered at him through the gaps in the smartly painted wires

“On a matter of life and death,” he repeated to himself. “Those words are more serious, perhaps, than you think. What do you mean?”

“What I say.”

The perspiration broke out thickly on his broad forehead. His left hand stole over the edge of the table. There was a drawer in it, with a lock, and the key was in the lock. His finger and thumb closed over the key, but did not turn it.

“So you know why I am leaving London?” he went on. “Tell me the reason, if you please.” He turned the key, and unlocked the drawer as he spoke.

“I can do better than that,” I replied. I can SHOW you the reason, if you like.”

“How can you show it?”

“You have got your coat off,” I said. “Roll up the shirt-sleeve on your left arm, and you will see it there.”

The same livid leaden change passed over his face which I had seen pass over it at the theatre. The deadly glitter in his eyes shone steady and straight into mine. He said nothing. But his left hand slowly opened the table-drawer, and softly slipped into it. The harsh grating noise of something heavy that he was moving unseen to me sounded

for a moment, then ceased. The silence that followed was so intense that the faint ticking nibble of the white mice at their wires was distinctly audible where I stood.

My life hung by a thread, and I knew it. At that final moment I thought with HIS mind, I felt with HIS fingers—I was as certain as if I had seen it of what he kept hidden from me in the drawer.

“Wait a little,” I said. “You have got the door locked—you see I don’t move—you see my hands are empty. Wait a little. I have something more to say.”

“You have said enough,” he replied, with a sudden composure so unnatural and so ghastly that it tried my nerves as no outbreak of violence could have tried them. “I want one moment for my own thoughts, if you please. Do you guess what I am thinking about?”

“Perhaps I do.”

“I am thinking,” he remarked quietly, “whether I shall add to the disorder in this room by scattering your brains about the fireplace.”

If I had moved at that moment, I saw in his face that he would have done it.

“I advise you to read two lines of writing which I have about me,” I rejoined, “before you finally decide that question.”

The proposal appeared to excite his curiosity. He nodded his head. I took Pesca’s acknowledgment of the receipt of my letter out of my pocket-book, handed it to him at arm’s length, and returned to my former position in front of the fireplace.

He read the lines aloud: “Your letter is received. If I don’t hear from you before the time you mention, I will break the seal when the clock strikes.”

Another man in his position would have needed some explanation of those words—the Count felt no such necessity. One reading of the note showed him the precaution that I had taken as plainly as if he had been present at the time when I adopted it. The expression of his face changed on the instant, and his hand came out of the drawer empty.

“I don’t lock up my drawer, Mr. Hartright,” he said, “and I don’t say that I may not scatter your brains about the fireplace yet. But I am a just man even to my enemy, and I will acknowledge beforehand that they are cleverer brains than I thought them. Come to the point, sir! You want something of me?”

“I do, and I mean to have it.”

“On conditions?”

“On no conditions.”

His hand dropped into the drawer again.

“Bah! we are travelling in a circle,” he said, “and those clever brains of yours are in danger again. Your tone is deplorably imprudent, sir—moderate it on the spot! The risk of shooting you on the place where you stand is less to me than the risk of letting you out of this house, except on conditions that I dictate and approve. You have not got my lamented friend to deal with now—you are face to face with Fosco! If the lives of twenty Mr. Hartrights were the stepping-stones to my safety, over all those stones I would go, sustained by my sublime indifference, self-balanced by my impenetrable calm. Respect me, if you love your own life! I summon you to answer three questions before you open your lips again. Hear them—they are necessary to this interview. Answer them—they are necessary to ME.” He held up one finger of his right hand. “First question!” he said. “You come here possessed of information which may be true or may be false—where did you get it?”

“I decline to tell you.”

“No matter—I shall find out. If that information is true—mind I say, with the whole force of my resolution, if—you are making your market of it here by treachery of your own or by treachery of some other man. I note that circumstance for future use in my memory, which forgets nothing, and proceed.” He held up another finger. “Second question! Those lines you invited me to read are without signature. Who wrote them?”

“A man whom I have every reason to depend on, and whom you have every reason to fear.”

My answer reached him to some purpose. His left hand trembled audibly in the drawer.

“How long do you give me,” he asked, putting his third question in a quieter tone, “before the clock strikes and the seal is broken?”

“Time enough for you to come to my terms,” I replied.

“Give me a plainer answer, Mr. Hartright. What hour is the clock to strike?”

“Nine, to-morrow morning.”

“Nine, to-morrow morning? Yes, yes—your trap is laid for me before I can get my passport regulated and leave London. It is not earlier, I suppose? We will see about that presently—I can keep you hostage here, and bargain with you to send for your letter before I let you go. In the meantime, be so good next as to mention your terms.”

“You shall hear them. They are simple, and soon stated. You know whose interests I represent in coming here?”

He smiled with the most supreme composure, and carelessly waved his right hand.

“I consent to hazard a guess,” he said jeeringly. “A lady’s interests, of course!”

“My Wife’s interests.”

He looked at me with the first honest expression that had crossed his face in my presence—an expression of blank amazement. I could see that I sank in his estimation as a dangerous man from that moment. He shut up the drawer at once, folded his arms over his breast, and listened to me with a smile of satirical attention.

“You are well enough aware,” I went on, “of the course which my inquiries have taken for many months past, to know that any attempted denial of plain facts will be quite useless in my presence. You are guilty of an infamous conspiracy! And the gain of a fortune of ten thousand pounds was your motive for it.”

He said nothing. But his face became overclouded suddenly by a lowering anxiety.

“Keep your gain,” I said. (His face lightened again immediately, and his eyes opened on me in wider and wider astonishment.) “I am not here to disgrace myself by bargaining for money which has passed through your hands, and which has been the price of a vile crime

“Gently, Mr. Hartright. Your moral clap-traps have an excellent effect in England—keep them for yourself and your own countrymen, if you please. The ten thousand pounds was a legacy left to my excellent wife by the late Mr. Fairlie. Place the affair on those grounds, and I will discuss it if you like. To a man of my sentiments, however, the subject is deplorably sordid. I prefer to pass it over. I invite you to resume the discussion of your terms. What do you demand?”

“In the first place, I demand a full confession of the conspiracy, written and signed in my presence by yourself.”

He raised his finger again. “One!” he said, checking me off with the steady attention of a practical man.

“In the second place, I demand a plain proof, which does not depend on your personal asseveration, of the date at which my wife left Blackwater Park and travelled to London.”

“So! so! you can lay your finger, I see, on the weak place,” he remarked composedly. “Any more?”

“At present, no more.”

“Good! you have mentioned your terms, now listen to mine. The responsibility to myself of admitting what you are pleased to call the ‘conspiracy’ is less, perhaps, upon the whole, than the responsibility of laying you dead on that hearthrug. Let us say that I meet your proposal—on my own conditions. The statement you demand of me shall be

written, and the plain proof shall be produced. You call a letter from my late lamented friend informing me of the day and hour of his wife's arrival in London, written, signed, and dated by himself, a proof, I suppose? I can give you this. I can also send you to the man of whom I hired the carriage to fetch my visitor from the railway, on the day when she arrived—his order-book may help you to your date, even if his coachman who drove me proves to be of no use. These things I can do, and will do, on conditions. I recite them. First condition! Madame Fosco and I leave this house when and how we please, without interference of any kind on your part. Second condition! You wait here, in company with me, to see my agent, who is coming at seven o'clock in the morning to regulate my affairs. You give my agent a written order to the man who has got your sealed letter to resign his possession of it. You wait here till my agent places that letter unopened in my hands, and you then allow me one clear half-hour to leave the house—after which you resume your own freedom of action and go where you please. Third condition! You give me the satisfaction of a gentleman for your intrusion into my private affairs, and for the language you have allowed yourself to use to me at this conference. The time and place, abroad, to be fixed in a letter from my hand when I am safe on the Continent, and that letter to contain a strip of paper measuring accurately the length of my sword. Those are my terms. Inform me if you accept them—Yes or No.”

The extraordinary mixture of prompt decision, far-sighted cunning, and mountebank bravado in this speech, staggered me for a moment—and only for a moment. The one question to consider was, whether I was justified or not in possessing myself of the means of establishing Laura's identity at the cost of allowing the scoundrel who had robbed her of it to escape me with impunity. I knew that the motive of securing the just recognition of my wife in the birthplace from which she had been driven out as an impostor, and of publicly erasing the lie that still profaned her mother's tombstone, was far purer, in its freedom from all taint of evil passion, than the vindictive motive which had mingled itself with my purpose from the first. And yet I cannot honestly say that my own moral convictions were strong enough to decide the struggle in me by themselves. They were helped by my remembrance of Sir Percival's death. How awfully, at the last moment, had the working of the retribution THERE been snatched from my feeble hands! What right had I to decide, in my poor mortal ignorance of the future, that this man, too, must escape with impunity because he escaped ME? I thought of these things—perhaps with the superstition inherent in my nature, perhaps with a sense worthier of me than superstition. It was hard, when I

had fastened my hold on him at last, to loosen it again of my own accord—but I forced myself to make the sacrifice. In plainer words, I determined to be guided by the one higher motive of which I was certain, the motive of serving the cause of Laura and the cause of Truth.

“I accept your conditions,” I said. “With one reservation on my part.”

“What reservation may that be?” he asked.

“It refers to the sealed letter,” I answered. “I require you to destroy it unopened in my presence as soon as it is placed in your hands.”

My object in making this stipulation was simply to prevent him from carrying away written evidence of the nature of my communication with Pesca. The fact of my communication he would necessarily discover, when I gave the address to his agent in the morning. But he could make no use of it on his own unsupported testimony—even if he really ventured to try the experiment—which need excite in me the slightest apprehension on Pesca’s account.

“I grant your reservation,” he replied, after considering the question gravely for a minute or two. “It is not worth dispute—the letter shall be destroyed when it comes into my hands.”

He rose, as he spoke, from the chair in which he had been sitting opposite to me up to this time. With one effort he appeared to free his mind from the whole pressure on it of the interview between us thus far. “Ouf!” he cried, stretching his arms luxuriously, “the skirmish was hot while it lasted. Take a seat, Mr. Hartright. We meet as mortal enemies here-after—let us, like gallant gentlemen, exchange polite attentions in the meantime. Permit me to take the liberty of calling for my wife.”

He unlocked and opened the door. “Eleanor!” he called out in his deep voice. The lady of the viperish face came in “Madame Fosco— Mr. Hartright,” said the Count, introducing us with easy dignity. “My angel,” he went on, addressing his wife, “will your labours of packing up allow you time to make me some nice strong coffee? I have writing business to transact with Mr. Hartright—and I require the full possession of my intelligence to do justice to myself.”

Madame Fosco bowed her head twice—once sternly to me, once submissively to her husband, and glided out of the room.

The Count walked to a writing-table near the window, opened his desk, and took from it several quires of paper and a bundle of quill pens. He scattered the pens about the table, so that they might lie ready in all directions to be taken up when wanted, and then cut the paper into a heap of narrow slips, of the form used by professional writers

for the press. "I shall make this a remarkable document," he said, looking at me over his shoulder. "Habits of literary composition are perfectly familiar to me. One of the rarest of all the intellectual accomplishments that a man can possess is the grand faculty of arranging his ideas. Immense privilege! I possess it. Do you?"

He marched backwards and forwards in the room, until the coffee appeared, humming to himself, and marking the places at which obstacles occurred in the arrangement of his ideas, by striking his forehead from time to time with the palm of his hand. The enormous audacity with which he seized on the situation in which I placed him, and made it the pedestal on which his vanity mounted for the one cherished purpose of self-display, mastered my astonishment by main force. Sincerely as I loathed the man, the prodigious strength of his character, even in its most trivial aspects, impressed me in spite of myself.

The coffee was brought in by Madame Fosco. He kissed her hand in grateful acknowledgment, and escorted her to the door; returned, poured out a cup of coffee for himself, and took it to the writing-table.

"May I offer you some coffee, Mr. Hartright?" he said, before he sat down.

I declined.

"What! you think I shall poison you?" he said gaily. "The English intellect is sound, so far as it goes," he continued, seating himself at the table; "but it has one grave defect—it is always cautious in the wrong place."

He dipped his pen in the ink, placed the first slip of paper before him with a thump of his hand on the desk, cleared his throat, and began. He wrote with great noise and rapidity, in so large and bold a hand, and with such wide spaces between the lines, that he reached the bottom of the slip in not more than two minutes certainly from the time when he started at the top. Each slip as he finished it was paged, and tossed over his shoulder out of his way on the floor. When his first pen was worn out, THAT went over his shoulder too, and he pounced on a second from the supply scattered about the table. Slip after slip, by dozens, by fifties, by hundreds, flew over his shoulders on either side of him till he had snowed himself up in paper all round his chair. Hour after hour passed—and there I sat watching, there he sat writing. He never stopped, except to sip his coffee, and when that was exhausted, to smack his forehead from time to time. One o'clock struck, two, three, four—and still the slips flew about all round him; still the untiring pen scraped its way ceaselessly from top to bottom of the page, still the white chaos of paper rose higher and higher all round his chair. At four o'clock I heard a sudden splutter of the pen, indicative of the flourish with which he signed his name.



“Bravo!” he cried, springing to his feet with the activity of a young man, and looking me straight in the face with a smile of superb triumph.

“Done, Mr. Hartright I “ he announced with a self-renovating thump of his fist on his broad breast. “Done, to my own profound satisfaction—to YOUR profound astonishment, when you read what I have written. The subject is exhausted: the man—Fosco—is not. I proceed to the arrangement of my slips—to the revision of my slips—to the reading of my slips—addressed emphatically to your private ear. Four o’clock has just struck. Good! Arrangement, revision, reading, from four to five. Short snooze of restoration for myself from five to six. Final preparations from six to seven. Affair of agent and sealed letter from seven to eight. At eight, en route. Behold the programme!”

He sat down cross-legged on the floor among his papers, strung them together with a bodkin and a piece of string—revised them, wrote all the titles and honours by which he was personally distinguished at the head of the first page, and then read the manuscript to me with loud theatrical emphasis and profuse theatrical gesticulation. The reader will have an opportunity, ere long, of forming his own opinion of the document. It will be sufficient to mention here that it answered my purpose.

He next wrote me the address of the person from whom he had hired the fly, and handed me Sir Percival’s letter. It was dated from Hampshire on the 25th of July, and it announced the journey of “Lady Glyde” to London on the 26th. Thus, on the very day (the 25th) when the doctor’s certificate declared that she had died in St. John’s Wood, she was alive, by Sir Percival’s own showing, at Blackwater—and, on the day after, she was to take a journey! When the proof of that journey was obtained from the flyman, the evidence would be complete.

“A quarter-past five,” said the Count, looking at his watch. “Time for my restorative snooze. I personally resemble Napoleon the Great, as you may have remarked, Mr. Hartright—I also resemble that immortal man in my power of commanding sleep at will. Excuse me one moment. I will summon Madame Fosco, to keep you from feeling dull.”

Knowing as well as he did, that he was summoning Madame Fosco to ensure my not leaving the house while he was asleep, I made no reply, and occupied myself in tying up the papers which he had placed in my possession.

The lady came in, cool, pale, and venomous as ever. “Amuse Mr. Hartright, my angel,” said the Count. He placed a chair for her, kissed her hand for the second time, withdrew to a sofa, and, in three minutes, was as peacefully and happily asleep as the most virtuous man in existence.

Madame Fosco took a book from the table, sat down, and looked at me, with the steady vindictive malice of a woman who never forgot and never forgave.

“I have been listening to your conversation with my husband,” she said. “If I had been in HIS place—I would have laid you dead on the hearthrug.”

With those words she opened her book, and never looked at me or spoke to me from that time till the time when her husband woke.

He opened his eyes and rose from the sofa, accurately to an hour from the time when he had gone to sleep.

“I feel infinitely refreshed,” he remarked. “Eleanor, my good wife, are you all ready upstairs? That is well. My little packing here can be completed in ten minutes—my travelling-dress assumed in ten minutes more. What remains before the agent comes?” He looked about the room, and noticed the cage with his white mice in it. “Ah!” he cried piteously, “a last laceration of my sympathies still remains. My innocent pets! my little cherished children! what am I to do with them? For the present we are settled nowhere; for the present we travel incessantly—the less baggage we carry the better for ourselves. My cockatoo, my canaries, and my little mice—who will cherish them when their good Papa is gone?”

He walked about the room deep in thought. He had not been at all troubled about writing his confession, but he was visibly perplexed and distressed about the far more important question of the disposal of his pets. After long consideration he suddenly sat down again at the writing-table.

“An idea!” he exclaimed. “I will offer my canaries and my cockatoo to this vast Metropolis—my agent shall present them in my name to the Zoological Gardens of London. The Document that describes them shall be drawn out on the spot.”

He began to write, repeating the words as they flowed from his pen.

“Number one. Cockatoo of transcendent plumage: attraction, of himself, to all visitors of taste. Number two. Canaries of unrivalled vivacity and intelligence: worthy of the garden of Eden, worthy also of the garden in the Regent’s Park. Homage to British Zoology. Offered by Fosco.”

The pen spluttered again, and the flourish was attached to his signature.

“Count! you have not included the mice,” said Madame Fosco

He left the table, took her hand, and placed it on his heart.

“All human resolution, Eleanor,” he said solemnly, “has its limits. MY limits are inscribed on that Document. I cannot part with my white mice. Bear with me, my angel, and remove them to their travelling cage upstairs.”

“Admirable tenderness!” said Madame Fosco, admiring her husband, with a last viperish look in my direction. She took up the cage carefully, and left the room.

The Count looked at his watch. In spite of his resolute assumption of composure, he was getting anxious for the agent’s arrival. The candles had long since been extinguished, and the sunlight of the new morning poured into the room. It was not till five minutes past seven that the gate bell rang, and the agent made his appearance. He was a foreigner with a dark beard.

“Mr. Hartright—Monsieur Rubelle,” said the Count, introducing us. He took the agent (a foreign spy, in every line of his face, if ever there was one yet) into a corner of the room, whispered some directions to him, and then left us together. “Monsieur Rubelle,” as soon as we were alone, suggested with great politeness that I should favour him with his instructions. I wrote two lines to Pesca, authorising him to deliver my sealed letter “to the bearer,” directed the note, and handed it to Monsieur Rubelle.

The agent waited with me till his employer returned, equipped in travelling costume. The Count examined the address of my letter before he dismissed the agent. “I thought so!” he said, turning on me with a dark look, and altering again in his manner from that moment.

He completed his packing, and then sat consulting a travelling map, making entries in his pocket-book, and looking every now and then impatiently at his watch. Not another word, addressed to myself, passed his lips. The near approach of the hour for his departure, and the proof he had seen of the communication established between Pesca and myself, had plainly recalled his whole attention to the measures that were necessary for securing his escape.

A little before eight o’clock, Monsieur Rubelle came back with my unopened letter in his hand. The Count looked carefully at the superscription and the seal, lit a candle, and burnt the letter. “I perform my promise,” he said, “but this matter, Mr. Hartright, shall not end here.”

The agent had kept at the door the cab in which he had returned. He and the maid-servant now busied themselves in removing the luggage. Madame Fosco came downstairs, thickly veiled, with the travelling cage of the white mice in her hand. She neither spoke to me nor looked towards me. Her husband escorted her to the cab. “Follow me as far as the passage,” he whispered in my ear; “I may want to speak to you at the last moment.”

I went out to the door, the agent standing below me in the front garden. The Count came back alone, and drew me a few steps inside the passage.

“Remember the Third condition!” he whispered. “You shall hear from me, Mr. Hartright—I may claim from you the satisfaction of a gentleman sooner than you think for.” He caught my hand before I was aware of him, and wrung it hard—then turned to the door, stopped, and came back to me again.

“One word more,” he said confidentially. “When I last saw Miss Halcombe, she looked thin and ill. I am anxious about that admirable woman. Take care of her, sir! With my hand on my heart, I solemnly implore you, take care of Miss Halcombe!”

Those were the last words he said to me before he squeezed his huge body into the cab and drove off.

The agent and I waited at the door a few moments looking after him. While we were standing together, a second cab appeared from a turning a little way down the road. It followed the direction previously taken by the Count’s cab, and as it passed the house and the open garden gate, a person inside looked at us out of the window. The stranger at the Opera again!—the foreigner with a scar on his left cheek.

“You wait here with me, sir, for half an hour more!” said Monsieur Rubelle.

“I do.”

We returned to the sitting-room. I was in no humour to speak to the agent, or to allow him to speak to me. I took out the papers which the Count had placed in my hands, and read the terrible story of the conspiracy told by the man who had planned and perpetrated it.

