



THE WOMAN  
IN WHITE  
WILKIE COLLINS



EPOCH THREE

**The Story Concluded by Walter Hartright, Part II**

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Two more events remain to be added to the chain before it reaches fairly from the outset of the story to the close.

While our new sense of freedom from the long oppression of the past was still strange to us, I was sent for by the friend who had given me my first employment in wood engraving, to receive from him a fresh testimony of his regard for my welfare. He had been commissioned by his employers to go to Paris, and to examine for them a fresh discovery in the practical application of his Art, the merits of which they were anxious to ascertain. His own engagements had not allowed him leisure time to undertake the errand, and he had most kindly suggested that it should be transferred to me. I could have no hesitation in thankfully accepting the offer, for if I acquitted myself of my commission as I hoped I should, the result would be a permanent engagement on the illustrated newspaper, to which I was now only occasionally attached.

I received my instructions and packed up for the journey the next day. On leaving Laura once more (under what changed circumstances!) in her sister's care, a serious consideration recurred to me, which had more than once crossed my wife's mind, as well as my own, already—I mean the consideration of Marian's future. Had we any right to let our selfish affection accept the devotion of all that generous life? Was it not our duty, our best expression of gratitude, to forget ourselves, and to think only of HER? I tried to say this when we were alone for a moment, before I went away. She took my hand, and silenced me at the first words.

“After all that we three have suffered together,” she said “there can be no parting between us till the last parting of all. My heart and my happiness, Walter, are with Laura and you. Wait a little till there are children's voices at your fireside. I will teach them to speak for me in THEIR language, and the first lesson they say to their father and mother shall be—We can't spare our aunt!”

My journey to Paris was not undertaken alone. At the eleventh hour Pesca decided that he would accompany me. He had not recovered his customary cheerfulness since

the night at the Opera, and he determined to try what a week's holiday would do to raise his spirits.

I performed the errand entrusted to me, and drew out the necessary report, on the fourth day from our arrival in Paris. The fifth day I arranged to devote to sight-seeing and amusements in Pesca's company.

Our hotel had been too full to accommodate us both on the same floor. My room was on the second story, and Pesca's was above me, on the third. On the morning of the fifth day I went upstairs to see if the Professor was ready to go out. Just before I reached the landing I saw his door opened from the inside—a long, delicate, nervous hand (not my friend's hand certainly) held it ajar. At the same time I heard Pesca's voice saying eagerly, in low tones, and in his own language—"I remember the name, but I don't know the man. You saw at the Opera he was so changed that I could not recognise him. I will forward the report—I can do no more." "No more need be done," answered the second voice. The door opened wide, and the light-haired man with the scar on his cheek—the man I had seen following Count Fosco's cab a week before—came out. He bowed as I drew aside to let him pass—his face was fearfully pale—and he held fast by the banisters as he descended the stairs.

I pushed open the door and entered Pesca's room. He was crouched up, in the strangest manner, in a corner of the sofa. He seemed to shrink from me when I approached him.

"Am I disturbing you?" I asked. "I did not know you had a friend with you till I saw him come out."

"No friend," said Pesca eagerly. "I see him to-day for the first time and the last."

"I am afraid he has brought you bad news?"

"Horrible news, Walter! Let us go back to London—I don't want to stop here—I am sorry I ever came. The misfortunes of my youth are very hard upon me," he said, turning his face to the wall, "very hard upon me in my later time. I try to forget them—and they will not forget ME!"

"We can't return, I am afraid, before the afternoon," I replied. "Would you like to come out with me in the meantime?"

"No, my friend, I will wait here. But let us go back to-day—pray let us go back."

I left him with the assurance that he should leave Paris that afternoon. We had arranged the evening before to ascend the Cathedral of Notre Dame, with Victor Hugo's noble romance for our guide. There was nothing in the French capital that I was more anxious to see, and I departed by myself for the church.



Approaching Notre Dame by the river-side, I passed on my way the terrible dead-house of Paris—the Morgue. A great crowd clamoured and heaved round the door. There was evidently something inside which excited the popular curiosity, and fed the popular appetite for horror.

I should have walked on to the church if the conversation of two men and a woman on the outskirts of the crowd had not caught my ear. They had just come out from seeing the sight in the Morgue, and the account they were giving of the dead body to their neighbours described it as the corpse of a man—a man of immense size, with a strange mark on his left arm.

The moment those words reached me I stopped and took my place with the crowd going in. Some dim foreshadowing of the truth had crossed my mind when I heard Pesca's voice through the open door, and when I saw the stranger's face as he passed me on the stairs of the hotel. Now the truth itself was revealed to me—revealed in the chance words that had just reached my ears. Other vengeance than mine had followed that fated man from the theatre to his own door—from his own door to his refuge in Paris. Other vengeance than mine had called him to the day of reckoning, and had exacted from him the penalty of his life. The moment when I had pointed him out to Pesca at the theatre in the hearing of that stranger by our side, who was looking for him too—was the moment that sealed his doom. I remembered the struggle in my own heart, when he and I stood face to face—the struggle before I could let him escape me—and shuddered as I recalled it.

Slowly, inch by inch, I pressed in with the crowd, moving nearer and nearer to the great glass screen that parts the dead from the living at the Morgue—nearer and nearer, till I was close behind the front row of spectators, and could look in.

There he lay, unowned, unknown, exposed to the flippant curiosity of a French mob! There was the dreadful end of that long life of degraded ability and heartless crime! Hushed in the sublime repose of death, the broad, firm, massive face and head fronted us so grandly that the chattering Frenchwomen about me lifted their hands in admiration, and cried in shrill chorus, "Ah, what a handsome man!" The wound that had killed him had been struck with a knife or dagger exactly over his heart. No other traces of violence appeared about the body except on the left arm, and there, exactly in the place where I had seen the brand on Pesca's arm, were two deep cuts in the shape of the letter T, which entirely obliterated the mark of the Brotherhood. His clothes, hung above him, showed that he had been himself conscious of his danger—they were clothes that had disguised him as a French artisan. For a few moments, but not for

longer, I forced myself to see these things through the glass screen. I can write of them at no greater length, for I saw no more.

The few facts in connection with his death which I subsequently ascertained (partly from Pesca and partly from other sources), may be stated here before the subject is dismissed from these pages.

His body was taken out of the Seine in the disguise which I have described, nothing being found on him which revealed his name, his rank, or his place of abode. The hand that struck him was never traced, and the circumstances under which he was killed were never discovered. I leave others to draw their own conclusions in reference to the secret of the assassination as I have drawn mine. When I have intimated that the foreigner with the scar was a member of the Brotherhood (admitted in Italy after Pesca's departure from his native country), and when I have further added that the two cuts, in the form of a T, on the left arm of the dead man, signified the Italian word "Traditore," and showed that justice had been done by the Brotherhood on a traitor, I have contributed all that I know towards elucidating the mystery of Count Fosco's death.

The body was identified the day after I had seen it by means of an anonymous letter addressed to his wife. He was buried by Madame Fosco in the cemetery of Pere la Chaise. Fresh funeral wreaths continue to this day to be hung on the ornamental bronze railings round the tomb by the Countess's own hand. She lives in the strictest retirement at Versailles. Not long since she published a biography of her deceased husband. The work throws no light whatever on the name that was really his own or on the secret history of his life—it is almost entirely devoted to the praise of his domestic virtues, the assertion of his rare abilities, and the enumeration of the honours conferred on him. The circumstances attending his death are very briefly noticed, and are summed up on the last page in this sentence—"His life was one long assertion of the rights of the aristocracy and the sacred principles of Order, and he died a martyr to his cause."