



Wilkie Collins

The Woman in White



Kharkiv
«Folio»
2022

FIRST EPOCH

THE STORY BEGUN BY WALTER HARTRIGHT

(of Clement's Inn, Teacher of Drawing)

T

I

his is the story of what a Woman's patience can endure, and what a Man's resolution can achieve.

If the machinery of the Law could be depended on to fathom every case of suspicion, and to conduct every process of inquiry, with moderate assistance only from the lubricating influences of oil of gold, the events which fill these pages might have claimed their share of the public attention in a Court of Justice.

But the Law is still, in certain inevitable cases, the pre-engaged servant of the long purse; and the story is left to be told, for the first time, in this place. As the Judge might once have heard it, so the Reader shall hear it now. No circumstance of importance, from the beginning to the end of the disclosure, shall be related on hearsay evidence. When the writer of these introductory lines (Walter Hartright by name) happens to be more closely connected than others with the incidents to be recorded, he will describe them in his own person. When his experience fails, he will retire from the position of narrator; and his task will be continued, from the point at which he has left it off, by other persons who can speak to the circumstances under notice from their own knowledge, just as clearly and positively as he has spoken before them.

Thus, the story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offence against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness—with the same object, in both cases, to present the truth always in its most direct and

most intelligible aspect; and to trace the course of one complete series of events, by making the persons who have been most closely connected with them, at each successive stage, relate their own experience, word for word.

Let Walter Hartright, teacher of drawing, aged twenty-eight years, be heard first.

II

It was the last day of July. The long hot summer was drawing to a close; and we, the weary pilgrims of the London pavement, were beginning to think of the cloud shadows on the corn fields, and the autumn breezes on the seashore.

For my own poor part, the fading summer left me out of health, out of spirits, and, if the truth must be told, out of money as well. During the past year I had not managed my professional resources as carefully as usual; and my extravagance now limited me to the prospect of spending the autumn economically between my mother's cottage at Hampstead and my own chambers in town.

The evening, I remember, was still and cloudy; the London air was at its heaviest; the distant hum of the street traffic was at its faintest; the small pulse of the life within me, and the great heart of the city around me, seemed to be sinking in unison, languidly and more languidly, with the sinking sun. I roused myself from the book which I was dreaming over rather than reading, and left my chambers to meet the cool night air in the suburbs. It was one of the two evenings in every week which I was accustomed to spend with my mother and my sister. So I turned my steps northward in the direction of Hampstead.

Events which I have yet to relate make it necessary to mention in this place that my father had been dead some years at the period of which I am now writing; and that my sister Sarah and I were the sole survivors of a family of five

children. My father was a drawing master before me. His exertions had made him highly successful in his profession; and his affectionate anxiety to provide for the future of those who were dependent on his labours had impelled him, from the time of his marriage, to devote to the insuring of his life a much larger portion of his income than most men consider it necessary to set aside for that purpose. Thanks to his admirable prudence and self-denial my mother and sister were left, after his death, as independent of the world as they had been during his lifetime. I succeeded to his connection, and had every reason to feel grateful for the prospect that awaited me at my starting in life.

The quiet twilight was still trembling on the topmost ridges of the heath; and the view of London below me had sunk into a black gulf in the shadow of the cloudy night, when I stood before the gate of my mother's cottage. I had hardly rung the bell before the house door was opened violently; my worthy Italian friend, Professor Pesca, appeared in the servant's place; and darted out joyously to receive me, with a shrill foreign parody on an English cheer.

On his own account, and, I must be allowed to add, on mine also, the Professor merits the honour of a formal introduction. Accident has made him the starting point of the strange family story which it is the purpose of these pages to unfold.

I had first become acquainted with my Italian friend by meeting him at certain great houses where he taught his own language and I taught drawing. All I then knew of the history of his life was, that he had once held a situation in the University of Padua; that he had left Italy for political reasons (the nature of which he uniformly declined to mention to anyone); and that he had been for many years respectably established in London as a teacher of languages.

Without being actually a dwarf—for he was perfectly well proportioned from head to foot—Pesca was, I think,

THE STORY CONTINUED BY VINCENT GILMORE

(of Chancery Lane, Solicitor)

I

I write these lines at the request of my friend, Mr. Walter Hartright. They are intended to convey a description of certain events which seriously affected Miss Fairlie's interests, and which took place after the period of Mr. Hartright's departure from Limmeridge House.

There is no need for me to say whether my own opinion does or does not sanction the disclosure of the remarkable family story, of which my narrative forms an important component part. Mr. Hartright has taken that responsibility on himself, and circumstances yet to be related will show that he has amply earned the right to do so, if he chooses to exercise it. The plan he has adopted for presenting the story to others, in the most truthful and most vivid manner, requires that it should be told, at each successive stage in the march of events, by the persons who were directly concerned in those events at the time of their occurrence. My appearance here, as narrator, is the necessary consequence of this arrangement. I was present during the sojourn of Sir Percival Glyde in Cumberland, and was personally concerned in one important result of his short residence under Mr. Fairlie's roof. It is my duty, therefore, to add these new links to the chain of events, and to take up the chain itself at the point where, for the present only Mr. Hartright has dropped it.

I arrived at Limmeridge House on Friday the second of November.

THE SECOND EPOCH

THE STORY CONTINUED BY MARIAN HALCOMBE

I
BLACKWATER PARK, HAMPSHIRE.

June 11th, 1850.—Six months to look back on—six long, lonely months since Laura and I last saw each other!

How many days have I still to wait? Only one! Tomorrow, the twelfth, the travellers return to England. I can hardly realise my own happiness—I can hardly believe that the next four-and-twenty hours will complete the last day of separation between Laura and me.

She and her husband have been in Italy all the winter, and afterwards in the Tyrol. They come back, accompanied by Count Fosco and his wife, who propose to settle somewhere in the neighbourhood of London, and who have engaged to stay at Blackwater Park for the summer months before deciding on a place of residence. So long as Laura returns, no matter who returns with her. Sir Percival may fill the house from floor to ceiling, if he likes, on condition that his wife and I inhabit it together.

Meanwhile, here I am, established at Blackwater Park, “the ancient and interesting seat” (as the county history obligingly informs me) “of Sir Percival Glyde, Bart.,” and the future abiding place (as I may now venture to add on my account) of plain Marian Halcombe, spinster, now settled in a snug little sitting room, with a cup of tea by her side, and all her earthly possessions ranged round her in three boxes and a bag.

CONTENTS

First Epoch

| | |
|--|-----|
| THE STORY BEGUN BY WALTER HARTRIGHT | 3 |
| THE STORY CONTINUED BY VINCENT GILMORE | 140 |
| THE STORY CONTINUED BY MARIAN HALCOMBE | 181 |

The second epoch

| | |
|---|-----|
| THE STORY CONTINUED BY MARIAN HALCOMBE | 220 |
| THE STORY CONTINUED BY FREDERICK FAIRLIE, ESQ., OF LIMMERIDGE HOUSE | 385 |
| THE STORY CONTINUED BY ELIZA MICHELSON | 407 |
| THE STORY CONTINUED IN SEVERAL NARRATIVES | 456 |
| 1. THE NARRATIVE OF HESTER PINHORN, COOK IN THE SERVICE OF COUNT FOSCO | 456 |
| 2. THE NARRATIVE OF THE DOCTOR | 462 |
| 3. THE NARRATIVE OF JANE GOULD | 463 |
| 4. THE NARRATIVE OF THE TOMBSTONE | 463 |
| 5. THE NARRATIVE OF WALTER HARTRIGHT | 463 |

The third epoch

| | |
|---|-----|
| THE STORY CONTINUED BY WALTER HARTRIGHT | 470 |
| THE STORY CONTINUED BY MRS. CATHERICK | 607 |
| THE STORY CONTINUED BY WALTER HARTRIGHT | 622 |
| THE STORY CONTINUED BY ISIDOR, OTTAVIO, BALDASSARE FOSCO | 690 |
| THE STORY CONCLUDED BY WALTER HARTRIGHT | 708 |