

“THE STORY OF OUR LIVES FROM YEAR TO YEAR.”—SHAKESPEARE.

ALL THE YEAR ROUND.

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THE WOMAN IN WHITE.

HARTRIGHT'S NARRATIVE CONTINUED.

VII.

WHEN I entered the room, I found Miss Halcombe and an elderly lady seated at the luncheon-table.

The elderly lady, when I was presented to her, proved to be Miss Fairlie's former governess, Mrs. Vesey, who had been briefly described to me by my lively companion at the breakfast-table, as possessed of “all the cardinal virtues, and counting for nothing.” I can do little more than offer my humble testimony to the truthfulness of Miss Halcombe's sketch of the old lady's character. Mrs. Vesey looked the personification of human composure and female amiability. A calm enjoyment of a calm existence beamed in drowsy smiles on her plump, placid face. Some of us rush through life; and some of us saunter through life. Mrs. Vesey *sat* through life. Sat in the house, early and late; sat in the garden; sat in unexpected window-seats in passages; sat (on a camp-stool) when her friends tried to take her out walking; sat before she looked at anything, before she talked of anything, before she answered, Yes, or No, to the commonest question—always with the same serene smile on her lips, the same vacantly attentive turn of her head, the same snugly, comfortable position of her hands and arms, under every possible change of domestic

circumstances. A mild, a compliant, an unutterably tranquil and harmless old lady, who never by any chance suggested the idea that she had been actually alive since the hour of her birth. Nature has so much to do in this world, and is engaged in generating such a vast variety of co-existent productions, that she must surely be now and then too flurried and confused to distinguish between the different processes that she is carrying on at the same time. Starting from this point of view, it will always remain my private persuasion that Nature was absorbed in making cabbages when Mrs. Vesey was born, and that the good lady suffered the consequences of a vegetable preoccupation in the mind of the Mother of us all.

“Now, Mrs. Vesey,” said Miss Halcombe, looking brighter, sharper, and readier than ever, by contrast with the undemonstrative old lady at her side, “what will you have? A cutlet?”

Mrs. Vesey crossed her dimpled hands on the edge of the table; smiled placidly; and said, “Yes, dear.”

“What is that, opposite Mr. Hartright? Boiled chicken, is it not? I thought you liked boiled chicken better than cutlet, Mrs. Vesey?”

Mrs. Vesey took her dimpled hands off the edge of the table and crossed them on her lap instead; nodded contemplatively at the boiled chicken; and said “Yes, dear.”

“Well, but which will you have, to-day? Shall Mr. Hartright give you some chicken? or shall I give you some cutlet?”



Mrs. Vesey put one of her dimpled hands back again on the edge of the table; hesitated drowsily; and said, "Which you please, dear."

"Mercy on me! it's a question for your taste, my good lady, not for mine. Suppose you have a little of both? and suppose you begin with the chicken, because Mr. Hartright looks devoured by anxiety to carve for you?"

Mrs. Vesey put the other dimpled hand back on the edge of the table; brightened dimly, one moment; went out again, the next; bowed obediently; and said, "If you please, sir."

Surely a mild, a compliant, an unutterably tranquil and harmless old lady? But enough, perhaps, for the present, of Mrs. Vesey.

All this time, there were no signs of Miss Fairlie. We finished our luncheon; and still she never appeared. Miss Halcombe, whose quick eye nothing escaped, noticed the looks that I cast, from time to time, in the direction of the door.

"I understand you, Mr. Hartright," she said; "you are wondering what has become of your other pupil. She has been down stairs, and has got over her headache; but has not sufficiently recovered her appetite to join us at lunch. If you will put yourself under my charge, I think I can undertake to find her somewhere in the garden."

She took up a parasol, lying on a chair near her, and led the way out, by a long window at the bottom of the room, which opened on to the lawn. It is almost unnecessary to say that we left Mrs. Vesey still seated at the table, with her dimpled hands still crossed on the edge of it; apparently settled in that position for the rest of the afternoon.

As we crossed the lawn, Miss Halcombe looked at me significantly, and shook her head.

"That mysterious adventure of yours," she said, "still remains involved in its own appropriate midnight darkness. I have been all the morning looking over my mother's letters; and I have made no

discoveries yet. However, don't despair, Mr. Hartright. This is a matter of curiosity; and you have got a woman for your ally. Under such conditions, success is certain, sooner or later. The letters are not exhausted. I have three packets still left, and you may confidently rely on my spending the whole evening over them."

Here, then, was one of my anticipations of the morning still unfulfilled. I began to wonder, next, whether my introduction to Miss Fairlie would disappoint the expectations that I had been forming of her since breakfast-time.

"And how did you get on with my uncle?" inquired Miss Halcombe, as we left the lawn and turned into a shrubbery. "Was he particularly nervous this morning? Never mind considering about your answer, Mr. Hartright. The mere fact of your being obliged to consider is enough for me. I see in your face that he *was* particularly nervous; and, as I am amiably unwilling to throw you into the same condition, I ask no more."

We turned off into a winding path while she was speaking, and approached a pretty summer-house, built of wood, in the form of a miniature Swiss *châlet*. The one room of the summer-house, as we ascended the steps at the door, was occupied by a young lady. She was standing near a rustic table, looking out at the inland view of moor and hill presented by a gap in the trees, and absently turning over the leaves of a little sketch-book that lay at her side. This was Miss Fairlie.

How can I describe her? How can I separate her from my own sensations, and from all that has happened in the later time? How can I see her again as she looked when my eyes first rested on her—as she should look, now, to the eyes that are about to see her in these pages?

The water-colour drawing that I made of Laura Fairlie, at an after period, in the place and attitude in which I first saw her, lies on my desk while I write. I look at it, and there dawns upon me brightly, from the dark greenish-brown background of the summer-house, a light,



youthful figure, clothed in a simple muslin dress, the pattern of it formed by broad alternate stripes of delicate blue and white. A scarf of the same material sits crisply and closely round her shoulders, and a little straw hat, of the natural colour, plainly and sparingly trimmed with ribbon to match the gown, covers her head, and throws its soft pearly shadow over the upper part of her face. Her hair is of so faint and pale a brown—not flaxen, and yet almost as light; not golden, and yet almost as glossy—that it nearly melts, here and there, into the shadow of the hat. It is plainly parted and drawn back over her ears, and the line of it ripples naturally as it crosses her forehead. The eyebrows are rather darker than the hair; and the eyes are of that soft, limpid, turquoise blue, so often sung by the poets, so seldom seen in real life. Lovely eyes in colour, lovely eyes in form—large and tender and quietly thoughtful—but beautiful above all things in the clear truthfulness of look that dwells in their inmost depths, and shines through all their changes of expression with the light of a purer and a better world. The charm—most gently and yet most distinctly expressed—which they shed over the whole face, so covers and transforms its little natural human blemishes elsewhere, that it is difficult to estimate the relative merits and defects of the other features. It is hard to see that the lower part of the face is too delicately refined away towards the chin to be in full and fair proportion with the upper part; that the nose, in escaping the aquiline bend (always hard and cruel in a woman, no matter how abstractedly perfect it may be), has erred a little in the other extreme, and has missed the ideal straightness of line; and that the sweet, sensitive lips are subject to a slight nervous contraction, when she smiles, which draws them upward a little at one corner, towards the cheek. It might be possible to note these blemishes in another woman's face, but it is not easy to dwell on them in hers, so subtly are they connected with all that is individual and characteristic in her

expression, and so closely does the expression depend for its full play and life, in every other feature, on the moving impulse of the eyes.

Does my poor portrait of her, my fond, patient labour of long and happy days, show me these things? Ah, how few of them are in the dim mechanical drawing, and how many in the mind with which I regard it! A fair, delicate girl, in a pretty light dress, trifling with the leaves of a sketch-book, while she looks up from it with truthful innocent blue eyes—that is all the drawing can say; all, perhaps, that even the deeper reach of thought and pen can say in their language, either. The woman who first gives life, light, and form to our shadowy conceptions of beauty, fills a void in our spiritual nature that has remained unknown to us till she appeared. Sympathies that lie too deep for words, too deep almost for thoughts, are touched, at such times, by other charms than those which the senses feel and which the resources of expression can realise. The mystery which underlies the beauty of women is never raised above the reach of all expression until it has claimed kindred with the deeper mystery in our own souls. Then, and then only, has it passed beyond the narrow region on which light falls, in this world, from the pencil and the pen.

Think of her, as you thought of the first woman who quickened the pulses within you that the rest of her sex had no art to stir. Let the kind, candid blue eyes meet yours, as they met mine, with the one matchless look which we both remember so well. Let her voice speak the music that you once loved best, attuned as sweetly to your ear as to mine. Let her footstep, as she comes and goes, in these pages, be like that other footstep to whose airy fall your own heart once beat time. Take her as the visionary nursling of your own fancy; and she will grow upon you, all the more clearly, as the living woman who dwells in mine.

Among the sensations that crowded on me, when my eyes first looked upon her—familiar sensations which we all know, which spring to life in most of our



hearts, die again in so many, and renew their bright existence in so few—there was one that troubled and perplexed me; one that seemed strangely inconsistent and unaccountably out of place in Miss Fairlie's presence.

Mingling with the vivid impression produced by the charm of her fair face and head, her sweet expression, and her winning simplicity of manner, was another impression, which, in a shadowy way, suggested to me the idea of something wanting. At one time it seemed like something wanting in *her*; at another, like something wanting in myself, which hindered me from understanding her as I ought. The impression was always strongest, in the most contradictory manner, when she looked at me; or, in other words, when I was most conscious of the harmony and charm of her face, and yet, at the same time, most troubled by the sense of an incompleteness which it was impossible to discover. Something wanting, something wanting—and where it was, and what it was, I could not say.

The effect of this curious caprice of fancy (as I thought it then) was not of a nature to set me at my ease, during a first interview with Miss Fairlie. The few kind words of welcome which she spoke found me hardly self-possessed enough to thank her in the customary phrases of reply. Observing my hesitation, and no doubt attributing it, naturally enough, to some momentary shyness, on my part, Miss Halcombe took the business of talking, as easily and readily as usual, into her own hands.

“Look there, Mr. Hartright,” she said, pointing to the sketch-book on the table, and to the little delicate wandering hand that was still trifling with it. “Surely you will acknowledge that your model pupil is found at last? The moment she hears that you are in the house, she seizes her inestimable sketch-book, looks universal Nature straight in the face, and longs to begin!”

Miss Fairlie laughed with a ready good humour, which broke out, as brightly as if it had been part of the sunshine

above us, over her lovely face.

“I must not take credit to myself where no credit is due,” she said; her clear, truthful blue eyes looking alternately at Miss Halcombe and at me. “Fond as I am of drawing, I am so conscious of my own ignorance that I am more afraid than anxious to begin. Now I know you are here, Mr. Hartright, I find myself looking over my sketches, as I used to look over my lessons when I was a little girl, and when I was sadly afraid that I should turn out not fit to be heard.”

She made the confession very prettily and simply, and, with quaint, childish earnestness, drew the sketch-book away close to her own side of the table. Miss Halcombe cut the knot of the little embarrassment forthwith, in her resolute, downright way.

“Good, bad, or indifferent,” she said, “the pupil's sketches must pass through the fiery ordeal of the master's judgment—and there's an end of it. Suppose we take them with us in the carriage, Laura, and let Mr. Hartright see them, for the first time, under circumstances of perpetual jolting and interruption? If we can only confuse him all through the drive, between Nature as it is, when he looks up at the view, and Nature as it is not, when he looks down again at our sketch-books, we shall drive him into the last desperate refuge of paying us compliments, and shall slip through his professional fingers with our pet feathers of vanity all unruffled.”

“I hope Mr. Hartright will pay *me* no compliments,” said Miss Fairlie, as we all left the summer-house.

“May I venture to inquire why you express that hope?” I asked.

“Because I shall believe all that you say to me,” she answered, simply.

In those few words she unconsciously gave me the key to her whole character; to that generous trust in others which, in her nature, grew innocently out of the sense of her own truth. I only knew it intuitively, then. I know it by experience, now.

We merely waited to rouse good Mrs.



Vesey from the place which she still occupied at the deserted luncheon-table, before we entered the open carriage for our promised drive. The old lady and Miss Halcombe occupied the back seat; and Miss Fairlie and I sat together in front, with the sketch-book open between us, fairly exhibited at last to my professional eyes. All serious criticism on the drawings, even if I had been disposed to volunteer it, was rendered impossible by Miss Halcombe's lively resolution to see nothing but the ridiculous side of the Fine Arts, as practised by herself, her sister, and ladies in general. I can remember the conversation that passed, far more easily than the sketches that I mechanically looked over. That part of the talk, especially, in which Miss Fairlie took any share, is still as vividly impressed on my memory as if I had heard it only a few hours ago.

Yes! let me acknowledge that, on this first day, I let the charm of her presence lure me from the recollection of myself and my position. The most trifling of the questions that she put to me, on the subject of using her pencil and mixing her colours; the slightest alterations of expression in the lovely eyes that looked into mine, with such an earnest desire to learn all that I could teach and to discover all that I could show, attracted more of my attention than the finest view we passed through, or the grandest changes of light and shade, as they flowed into each other over the waving moorland and the level beach. At any time, and under any circumstances of human interest, is it not strange to see how little real hold the objects of the natural world amid which we live can gain on our hearts and minds? We go to Nature for comfort in trouble, and sympathy in joy, only in books. Admiration of those beauties of the inanimate world, which modern poetry so largely and so eloquently describes, is not, even in the best of us, one of the original instincts of our nature. As children, we none of us possess it. No uninstructed man or woman possesses it. Those whose lives are most exclusively passed amid the

ever-changing wonders of sea and land, are also those who are most universally insensible to every aspect of Nature not directly associated with the human interest of their calling. Our capacity of appreciating the beauties of the earth we live on, is, in truth, one of the civilised accomplishments which we all learn, as an Art; and, more, that very capacity is rarely practised by any of us except when our minds are most indolent and most unoccupied. How much share have the attractions of Nature ever had in the pleasurable or painful interests and emotions of ourselves or our friends? What space do they ever occupy in the thousand little narratives of personal experience which pass every day by word of mouth from one of us to the other? All that our minds can compass, all that our hearts can learn, can be accomplished with equal certainty, equal profit, and equal satisfaction to ourselves, in the poorest as in the richest prospect that the face of the earth can show. There is surely a reason for this want of inborn sympathy between the creature and the creation around it, a reason which may perhaps be found in the widely differing destinies of man and his earthly sphere. The grandest mountain prospect that the eye can range over is appointed to annihilation. The smallest human interest that the pure heart can feel, is appointed to immortality.

We had been out nearly three hours, when the carriage again passed through the gates of Limmeridge House.

On our way back, I had let the ladies settle for themselves the first point of view which they were to sketch, under my instructions, on the afternoon of the next day. When they withdrew to dress for dinner, and when I was alone again in my little sitting-room, my spirits seemed to leave me on a sudden. I felt ill at ease and dissatisfied with myself, I hardly knew why. Perhaps I was now conscious, for the first time, of having enjoyed our drive too much in the character of a guest, and too little in the character of a drawing-master. Perhaps that strange sense of something wanting, either in Miss Fairlie or in



myself, which had perplexed me when I was first introduced to her, haunted me still. Anyhow, it was a relief to my spirits when the dinner-hour called me out of my solitude, and took me back to the society of the ladies of the house.

I was struck, on entering the drawing-room, by the curious contrast, rather in material than in colour, of the dresses which they now wore. While Mrs. Vesey and Miss Halcombe were richly clad (each in the manner most becoming to her age), the first in silver-grey, and the second in that delicate primrose-yellow colour, which matches so well with a dark complexion and black hair, Miss Fairlie was unpretendingly and almost poorly dressed in plain white muslin. It was spotlessly pure; it was beautifully put on; but still it was the sort of dress which the wife or daughter of a poor man might have worn; and it made the heiress of Limmeridge House, so far as externals went, look less affluent in circumstances than her own governess. At a later period, when I learnt to know more of Miss Fairlie's character, I discovered that this curious contrast, on the wrong side, was due to her natural delicacy of feeling and natural intensity of aversion to the slightest personal display of her own wealth. Neither Mrs. Vesey nor Miss Halcombe could ever induce her to let the advantage in dress desert the two ladies who were poor, to lean to the side of the one lady who was rich.

When dinner was over, we returned together to the drawing-room. Although Mr. Fairlie (emulating the magnificent condescension of the monarch who had picked up Titian's brush for him) had instructed his butler to consult my wishes in relation to the wine that I might prefer after dinner, I was resolute enough to resist the temptation of sitting in solitary grandeur among bottles of my own choosing, and sensible enough to ask the ladies' permission to leave the table with them habitually, on the civilised foreign plan, during the period of my residence at Limmeridge House.

The drawing-room, to which we had

now withdrawn for the rest of the evening, was on the ground-floor, and was of the same shape and size as the breakfast-room. Large glass doors at the lower end opened on to a terrace, beautifully ornamented along its whole length with a profusion of flowers. The soft, hazy twilight was just shading leaf and blossom alike into harmony with its own sober hues, as we entered the room; and the sweet evening scent of the flowers met us with its fragrant welcome through the open glass doors. Good Mrs. Vesey (always the first of the party to sit down) took possession of an arm-chair in a corner, and dozed off comfortably to sleep. At my request, Miss Fairlie placed herself at the piano. As I followed her to a seat near the instrument, I saw Miss Halcombe retire into a recess of one of the side windows, to proceed with the search through her mother's letters by the last quiet rays of the evening light.

How vividly that peaceful home-picture of the drawing-room comes back to me while I write! From the place where I sat, I could see Miss Halcombe's graceful figure, half of it in soft light, half in mysterious shadow, bending intently over the letters in her lap; while, nearer to me, the fair profile of the player at the piano was just delicately defined against the faintly deepening background of the inner wall of the room. Outside, on the terrace, the clustering flowers and long grasses and creepers waved so gently in the light evening air, that the sound of their rustling never reached us. The sky was without a cloud; and the dawning mystery of moonlight began to tremble already in the region of the eastern heaven. The sense of peace and seclusion soothed all thought and feeling into a rapt, unearthly repose; and the balmy quiet that deepened ever with the deepening light, seemed to hover over us with a gentler influence still, when there stole upon it from the piano the heavenly tenderness of the music of Mozart. It was an evening of sights and sounds never to forget.

We all sat silent in the places we had chosen—Mrs. Vesey still sleeping, Miss



Fairlie still playing, Miss Halcombe still reading—till the light failed us. By this time the moon had stolen round to the terrace, and soft, mysterious rays of light were slanting already across the lower end of the room. The change from the twilight obscurity was so beautiful, that we banished the lamps, by common consent, when the servant brought them in; and kept the large room unlighted, except by the glimmer of the two candles at the piano.

For half an hour more, the music still went on. After that, the beauty of the moonlight view on the terrace tempted Miss Fairlie out to look at it; and I followed her. When the candles at the piano had been lighted, Miss Halcombe had changed her place, so as to continue her examination of the letters by their assistance. We left her, on a low chair, at one side of the instrument, so absorbed over her reading that she did not seem to notice when we moved.

We had been out on the terrace together, just in front of the glass doors, hardly so long as five minutes, I should think; and Miss Fairlie was, by my advice, just tying her white handkerchief over her head as a precaution against the night air—when I heard Miss Halcombe's voice—low, eager, and altered from its natural lively tone—pronounce my name.

"Mr. Hartright," she said, "will you come here for a minute? I want to speak to you."

I entered the room again immediately. The piano stood about half way down along the inner wall. On the side of the instrument farthest from the terrace, Miss Halcombe was sitting with the letters scattered on her lap, and with one in her hand selected from them, and held close to the candle. On the side nearest to the terrace there stood a low ottoman, on which I took my place. In this position, I was not far from the glass doors; and I could see Miss Fairlie plainly, as she passed and repassed the opening on to the terrace; walking slowly from end to end of it in the full radiance of the moon.

"I want you to listen while I read the

concluding passages in this letter," said Miss Halcombe. "Tell me if you think they throw any light upon your strange adventure on the road to London. The letter is addressed by my mother to her second husband, Mr. Fairlie; and the date refers to a period of between eleven and twelve years since. At that time, Mr. and Mrs. Fairlie, and my half-sister Laura, had been living for years in this house; and I was away from them, completing my education at a school in Paris."

She looked and spoke earnestly, and, as I thought, a little uneasily, as well. At the moment when she raised the letter to the candle before beginning to read it, Miss Fairlie passed us on the terrace, looked in for a moment, and, seeing that we were engaged, slowly walked on.

Miss Halcombe began to read, as follows:

" 'You will be tired, my dear Philip, of hearing perpetually about my schools and my scholars. Lay the blame, pray, on the dull uniformity of life at Limmeridge, and not on me. Besides, this time, I have something really interesting to tell you about a new scholar.

" 'You know old Mrs. Kempe, at the village shop. Well, after years of ailing, the doctor has at last given her up, and she is dying slowly, day by day. Her only living relation, a sister, arrived last week to take care of her. This sister comes all the way from Hampshire—her name is Mrs. Catherick. Four days ago Mrs. Catherick came here to see me, and brought her only child with her, a sweet little girl about a year older than our darling Laura ——' "

As the last sentence fell from the reader's lips, Miss Fairlie passed us on the terrace once more. She was softly singing to herself one of the melodies which she had been playing earlier in the evening. Miss Halcombe waited till she had passed out of sight again; and then went on with the letter:

" 'Mrs. Catherick is a decent, well-behaved, respectable woman; middle aged,



and with the remains of having been moderately, only moderately, nice-looking. There is something in her manner and her appearance, however, which I can't make out. She is reserved about herself to the point of downright secrecy; and there is a look in her face—I can't describe it—which suggests to me that she has something on her mind. She is altogether what you would call a walking mystery. Her errand at Limmeridge House, however, was simple enough. When she left Hampshire to nurse her sister, Mrs. Kempe, through her last illness, she had been obliged to bring her daughter with her, through having no one at home to take care of the little girl. Mrs. Kempe may die in a week's time, or may linger on for months; and Mrs. Catherick's object was to ask me to let her daughter, Anne, have the benefit of attending my school; subject to the condition of her being removed from it to go home again with her mother, after Mrs. Kempe's death. I consented at once; and when Laura and I went out for our walk, we took the little girl (who is just eleven years old) to the school, that very day.' ”

Once more, Miss Fairlie's figure, bright and soft in its snowy muslin dress—her face prettily framed by the white folds of the handkerchief which she had tied under her chin—passed by us in the moonlight. Once more, Miss Halcombe waited till she was out of sight; and then went on:

“ I have taken a violent fancy, Philip, to my new scholar, for a reason which I mean to keep till the last for the sake of surprising you. Her mother having told me as little about the child as she told me of herself, I was left to discover (which I did on the first day when we tried her at lessons) that the poor little thing's intellect is not developed as it ought to be at her age. Seeing this, I had her up to the house the next day, and privately arranged with the doctor to come and watch her and question her, and tell me what he thought. His opinion is that she

will grow out of it. But he says her careful bringing-up at school is a matter of great importance just now, because her unusual slowness in acquiring ideas implies an unusual tenacity in keeping them, when they are once received into her mind. Now, my love, you must not imagine, in your off-hand way, that I have been attaching myself to an idiot. This poor little Anne Catherick is a sweet, affectionate, grateful girl; and says the quaintest, prettiest things (as you shall judge by an instance), in the most oddly sudden, surprised, half-frightened way. Although she is dressed very neatly, her clothes show a sad want of taste in colour and pattern. So I arranged, yesterday, that some of our darling Laura's old white frocks and white hats should be altered for Anne Catherick; explaining to her that little girls of her complexion looked neater and better in all white than in anything else. She hesitated and seemed puzzled for a minute; then flushed up, and appeared to understand. Her little hand clasped mine, suddenly. She kissed it, Philip; and said (oh, so earnestly!), “ I will always wear white as long as I live. It will help me to remember you, ma'am, and to think that I am pleasing you still, when I go away and see you no more.” This is only one specimen of the quaint things she says so prettily. Poor little soul! She shall have a stock of white frocks, made with good deep tucks, to let out for her as she grows —' ”

Miss Halcombe paused, and looked at me across the piano.

“ Did the forlorn woman whom you met in the high road seem young?” she asked. “ Young enough to be two or three-and-twenty?”

“ Yes, Miss Halcombe, as young as that.”

“ And she was strangely dressed, from head to foot, all in white?”

“ All in white.”

While the answer was passing my lips, Miss Fairlie glided into view on the terrace, for the third time. Instead of proceeding on her walk, she stopped, with her back turned towards us; and, leaning



on the balustrade of the terrace, looked down into the garden beyond. My eyes fixed upon the white gleam of her muslin gown and head-dress in the moonlight, and a sensation, for which I can find no name—a sensation that quickened my pulse, and raised a fluttering at my heart—began to steal over me.

“All in white!” Miss Halcombe repeated. “The most important sentences in the letter, Mr. Hartright, are those at the end, which I will read to you immediately. But I can’t help dwelling a little upon the coincidence of the white costume of the woman you met, and the white frocks which produced that strange answer from my mother’s little scholar. The doctor may have been wrong when he discovered the child’s defects of intellect, and predicted that she would ‘grow out of them.’ She may never have grown out of them; and the old grateful fancy about dressing in white, which was a serious feeling to the girl, may be a serious feeling to the woman still.”

I said a few words in answer—I hardly know what. All my attention was concentrated on the white gleam of Miss Fairlie’s muslin dress.

“Listen to the last sentences of the letter,” said Miss Halcombe. “I think they will surprise you.”

As she raised the letter to the light of the candle, Miss Fairlie turned from the balustrade, looked doubtfully up and down the terrace, advanced a step towards the glass doors, and then stopped, facing us.

Meanwhile, Miss Halcombe read me the last sentences to which she had referred:

“ ‘And now, my love, seeing that I am at the end of my paper, now for the real reason, the surprising reason, for my fondness for little Anne Catherick. My dear Philip, although she is not half so pretty, she is, nevertheless, by one of those extraordinary caprices of accidental resemblance which one sometimes sees, the living likeness, in her hair, her complexion, the colour of her eyes, and the shape of her face ——’ ”

I started up from the ottoman, before Miss Halcombe could pronounce the next words. A thrill of the same feeling which ran through me when the touch was laid upon my shoulder on the lonely high-road, chilled me again.

There stood Miss Fairlie, a white figure, alone in the moonlight; in her attitude, in the turn of her head, in her complexion, in the shape of her face, the living image, at that distance and under those circumstances, of the woman in white! The doubt which had troubled my mind for hours and hours past, flashed into conviction in an instant. That “something wanting” was my own recognition of the ominous likeness between the fugitive from the asylum the heiress at Limmeridge House.

“You see it!” said Miss Halcombe. She dropped the useless letter, and her eyes flashed as they met mine. “You see it now, as my mother saw it eleven years since!”

“I see it—more unwillingly than I can say. To associate that forlorn, friendless, lost woman, even by an accidental likeness only, with Miss Fairlie, seems like casting a shadow on the future of the bright creature who stands looking at us now. Let me lose the impression again, as soon as possible. Call her in, out of the dreary moonlight—pray call her in!”

“Mr. Hartright, you surprise me. Whatever women may be, I thought that men, in the nineteenth century, were above superstition.”

“Pray call her in!”

“Hush, hush! She is coming of her own accord. Say nothing in her presence. Let this discovery of the likeness be kept a secret between you and me. Come in, Laura; come in, and wake Mrs. Vesey with the piano. Mr. Hartright is petitioning for some more music, and he wants it, this time, of the lightest and liveliest kind.”

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