

“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.

VIII.

So ended my eventful first day at Limmeridge House.

Miss Halcombe and I kept our secret. After the discovery of the likeness no fresh light seemed destined to break over the mystery of the woman in white. At the first safe opportunity Miss Halcombe cautiously led her half-sister to speak of their mother, of old times, and of Anne Catherick. Miss Fairlie's recollections of the little scholar at Limmeridge were, however, only of the most vague and general kind. She remembered the likeness between herself and her mother's favourite pupil, as something which had been supposed to exist in past times; but she did not refer to the gift of the white dresses, or to the singular form of words in which the child had artlessly expressed her gratitude for them. She remembered that Anne had remained at Limmeridge for a few months only, and had then left it to go back to her home in Hampshire; but she could not say whether the mother and daughter had ever returned, or had ever been heard of afterwards. No further search, on Miss Halcombe's part, through the few letters of Mrs. Fairlie's writing which she had left unread, assisted in clearing up the uncertainties still left to perplex us. We had identified the unhappy woman whom

I had met in the night-time, with Anne Catherick—we had made some advance, at least, towards connecting the probably defective condition of the poor creature's intellect with the peculiarity of her being dressed all in white, and with the continuance, in her maturer years, of her childish gratitude towards Mrs. Fairlie—and there, so far as we knew at that time, our discoveries had ended.

The days passed on, the weeks passed on; and the track of the golden autumn wound its bright way visibly through the green summer of the trees. Peaceful, fast-flowing, happy time! my story glides by you now, as swiftly as you once glided by me. Of all the treasures of enjoyment that you poured so freely into my heart, how much is left me that has purpose and value enough to be written on this page? Nothing but the saddest of all confessions that a man can make—the confession of his own folly.

The secret which that confession discloses should be told with little effort, for it has indirectly escaped me already. The poor weak words which have failed to describe Miss Fairlie, have succeeded in betraying the sensations she awakened in me. It is so with us all. Our words are giants when they do us an injury, and dwarfs when they do us a service.

I loved her.

Ah! how well I know all the sadness and all the mockery that is contained in those three words. I can sigh over my mournful confession with the tenderest



woman who reads it and pities me. I can laugh at it as bitterly as the hardest man who tosses it from him in contempt. I loved her! Feel for me, or despise me, I confess it with the same immovable resolution to own the truth.

Was there no excuse for me? There was some excuse to be found, surely, in the conditions under which my term of hired service was passed at Limmeridge House.

My morning hours succeeded each other calmly in the quiet and seclusion of my own room. I had just work enough to do, in mounting my employer's drawings, to keep my hands and eyes pleurably employed, while my mind was left free to enjoy the dangerous luxury of its own unbridled thoughts. A perilous solitude, for it lasted long enough to enervate, not long enough to fortify me. A perilous solitude, for it was followed by afternoons and evenings spent, day after day and week after week, alone in the society of two women, one of whom possessed all the accomplishments of grace, wit, and high-breeding, the other all the charms of beauty, gentleness, and simple truth, that can purify and subdue the heart of man. Not a day passed, in that dangerous intimacy of teacher and pupil, in which my hand was not close to Miss Fairlie's; my cheek, as we bent together over her sketch-book, almost touching hers. The more attentively she watched every movement of my brush, the more closely I was breathing the perfume of her hair, and the warm fragrance of her breath. It was part of my service, to live in the very light of her eyes—at one time to be bending over her, so close to her bosom as to tremble at the thought of touching it; at another, to feel her bending over me, bending so close to see what I was about, that her voice sank low when she spoke to me, and her ribbons brushed my cheek in the wind before she could draw them back.

The evenings which followed the sketching excursions of the afternoon, varied, rather than checked, these innocent, these inevitable familiarities. My natural fondness for the music which

she played with such tender feeling, such delicate womanly taste, and her natural enjoyment of giving me back, by the practice of her art, the pleasure which I had offered to her by the practice of mine, only wove another tie which drew us closer and closer to one another. The accidents of conversation; the simple habits which regulated even such a little thing as the position of our places at table; the play of Miss Halcombe's ever-ready raillery, always directed against my anxiety, as teacher, while it sparkled over her enthusiasm as pupil; the harmless expression of poor Mrs. Vesey's drowsy approval which connected Miss Fairlie and me as two model young people who never disturbed her—every one of these trifles, and many more, combined to fold us together in the same domestic atmosphere, and to lead us both insensibly to the same hopeless end.

I should have remembered my position, and have put myself secretly on my guard. I did so; but not till it was too late. All the discretion, all the experience, which had availed me with other women, and secured me against other temptations, failed me with her. It had been my profession, for years past, to be in this close contact with young girls of all ages, and of all orders of beauty. I had accepted the position as part of my calling in life; I had trained myself to leave all the sympathies natural to my age in my employer's outer hall, as coolly as I left my umbrella there before I went up-stairs. I had long since learnt to understand, composedly and as a matter of course, that my situation in life was considered a guarantee against any of my female pupils feeling more than the most ordinary interest in me, and that I was admitted among beautiful and captivating women, much as a harmless domestic animal is admitted among them. This guardian experience I had gained early; this guardian experience had sternly and strictly guided me straight along my own poor narrow path, without once letting me stray aside, to the right hand or to the left. And now, I and my trusty talisman were



parted for the first time. Yes, my hardly-earned self-control was as completely lost to me as if I had never possessed it; lost to me, as it is lost every day to other men, in other critical situations, where women are concerned. I know, now, that I should have questioned myself from the first. I should have asked why any room in the house was better than home to me when she entered it, and barren as a desert when she went out again—why I always noticed and remembered the little changes in her dress that I had noticed and remembered in no other woman's before—why I saw her, heard her, and touched her (when we shook hands at night and morning) as I had never seen, heard, and touched any other woman in my life? I should have looked into my own heart, and found this new growth springing up there, and plucked it out while it was young. Why was this easiest, simplest work of self-culture always too much for me? The explanation has been written already in the three words that were many enough, and plain enough, for my confession. I loved her.

The days passed, the weeks passed; it was approaching the third month of my stay in Cumberland. The delicious monotony of life in our calm seclusion, flowed on with me like a smooth stream with a swimmer who glides down the current. All memory of the past, all thought of the future, all sense of the falseness and hopelessness of my own position, lay hushed within me into deceitful rest. Lulled by the Syren-song that my own heart sung to me, with eyes shut to all sight, and ears closed to all sound of danger, I drifted nearer and nearer to the fatal rocks. The warning that aroused me at last, and startled me into sudden, self-accusing consciousness of my own weakness, was the plainest, the truest, the kindest of all warnings, for it came silently from *her*.

We had parted one night, as usual. No word had fallen from my lips, at that time or at any time before it, that could betray me, or startle her into sudden knowledge of the truth. But, when we met

again in the morning, a change had come over her—a change that told me all.

I shrank then—I shrink still—from invading the innermost sanctuary of her heart, and laying it open to others, as I have laid open my own. Let it be enough to say that the time when she first surprised my secret, was, I firmly believe, the time when she first surprised her own, and the time, also, when she changed towards me in the interval of one night. Her nature, too truthful to deceive others, was too noble to deceive itself. When the doubt that I had hushed asleep, first laid its weary weight on her heart, the true face owned all, and said, in its own frank simple language—I am sorry for him; I am sorry for myself.

It said this, and more, which I could not then interpret. I understood but too well the change in her manner, to greater kindness and quicker readiness in interpreting all my wishes, before others—to constraint and sadness, and nervous anxiety to absorb herself in the first occupation she could seize on, whenever we happened to be left together alone. I understood why the sweet sensitive lips smiled so rarely and so restrainedly now; and why the clear blue eyes looked at me, sometimes with the pity of an angel, sometimes with the innocent perplexity of a child. But the change meant more than this. There was a coldness in her hand, there was an unnatural immobility in her face, there was in all her movements the mute expression of constant fear and clinging self-reproach. The sensations that I could trace to herself and to me, the unacknowledged sensations that we were feeling in common, were not these. There were certain elements of the change in her that were still secretly drawing us together, and others that were, as secretly, beginning to drive us apart.

In my doubt and perplexity, in my vague suspicion of something hidden which I was left to find by my own unaided efforts, I examined Miss Halcombe's looks and manner for enlightenment. Living in such intimacy as ours, no serious alteration could take place



in any one of us which did not sympathetically affect the others. The change in Miss Fairlie was reflected in her half-sister. Although not a word escaped Miss Halcombe which hinted at an altered state of feeling towards myself, her penetrating eyes had contracted a new habit of always watching me. Sometimes, the look was like suppressed anger; sometimes, like suppressed dread; sometimes, like neither—like nothing, in short, which I could understand. A week elapsed, leaving us all three still in this position of secret constraint towards one another. My situation, aggravated by the sense of my own miserable weakness and forgetfulness of myself, now too late awakened in me, was becoming intolerable. I felt that I must cast off the oppression under which I was living, at once and for ever—yet how to act for the best, or what to say first, was more than I could tell.

From this position of helplessness and humiliation, I was rescued by Miss Halcombe. Her lips told me the bitter, the necessary, the unexpected truth; her hearty kindness sustained me under the shock of hearing it; her sense and courage turned to its right use an event which threatened the worst that could happen, to me and to others, in Limmeridge House.

IX.

IT was on a Thursday in the week, and nearly at the end of the third month of my sojourn in Cumberland.

In the morning, when I went down into the breakfast-room, at the usual hour, Miss Halcombe, for the first time since I had known her, was absent from her customary place at the table.

Miss Fairlie was out on the lawn. She bowed to me, but did not come in. Not a word had dropped from my lips or from hers that could unsettle either of us—and yet the same unacknowledged sense of embarrassment made us shrink alike from meeting one another alone. She waited on the lawn; and I waited in the breakfast-room, till Mrs. Vesey or Miss Halcombe

came in. How quickly I should have joined her; how readily we should have shaken hands, and glided into our customary talk, only a fortnight ago!

In a few minutes, Miss Halcombe entered. She had a preoccupied look, and she made her apologies for being late, rather absently.

“I have been detained,” she said, “by a consultation with Mr. Fairlie on a domestic matter which he wished to speak to me about.”

Miss Fairlie came in from the garden; and the usual morning greeting passed between us. Her hand struck colder to mine than ever. She did not look at me; and she was very pale. Even Mrs. Vesey noticed it, when she entered the room a moment after.

“I suppose it’s the change in the wind,” said the old lady. “The winter is coming—ah, my love, the winter is coming soon!”

In her heart and in mine it had come already!

Our morning meal—once so full of pleasant good-humoured discussions of the plans for the day—was short and silent. Miss Fairlie seemed to feel the oppression of the long pauses in the conversation; and looked appealingly to her sister to fill them up. Miss Halcombe, after once or twice hesitating and checking herself, in a most uncharacteristic manner, spoke at last.

“I have seen your uncle this morning, Laura,” she said. “He thinks the purple room is the one that ought to be got ready; and he confirms what I told you. Monday is the day—not Tuesday.”

While these words were being spoken, Miss Fairlie looked down at the table beneath her. Her fingers moved nervously among the crumbs that were scattered on the cloth. The paleness on her cheeks spread to her lips, and the lips themselves trembled visibly. I was not the only person present who noticed this. Miss Halcombe saw it, too; and at once set us the example of rising from table.

Mrs. Vesey and Miss Fairlie left the room together. The kind sorrowful blue



eyes looked at me, for a moment, with the prescient sadness of a coming and a long farewell. I felt the answering pang in my own heart—the pang that told me I must lose her soon, and love her the more unchangeably for the loss.

I turned towards the garden, when the door had closed on her. Miss Halcombe was standing with her hat in her hand, and her shawl over her arm, by the large window that led out to the lawn, and was looking at me attentively.

“Have you any leisure time to spare,” she asked, “before you begin to work in your own room?”

“Certainly, Miss Halcombe. I have always time at your service.”

“I want to say a word to you in private, Mr. Hartright. Get your hat, and come out into the garden. We are not likely to be disturbed there at this hour in the morning.”

As we stepped out on to the lawn, one of the under-gardeners—a mere lad—passed us on his way to the house, with a letter in his hand. Miss Halcombe stopped him.

“Is that letter for me?” she asked.

“Nay, miss; it’s just said to be for Miss Fairlie,” answered the lad, holding out the letter as he spoke.

Miss Halcombe took it from him, and looked at the address.

“A strange handwriting,” she said to herself. “Who can Laura’s correspondent be? Where did you get this?” she continued, addressing the gardener.

“Well, miss,” said the lad, “I just got it from a woman.”

“What woman?”

“A woman well stricken in age.”

“Oh, an old woman. Any one you knew?”

“I canna’ tak’ it on mysel’ to say that she was other than a stranger to me.”

“Which way did she go?”

“That gate,” said the under-gardener, turning with great deliberation towards the south, and embracing the whole of that part of England with one comprehensive sweep of his arm.

“Curious,” said Miss Halcombe; “I

suppose it must be a begging-letter. There,” she added, handing the letter back to the lad, “take it to the house, and give it to one of the servants. And now, Mr. Hartright, if you have no objection, let us walk this way.”

She led me across the lawn, along the same path by which I had followed her on the day after my arrival at Limmeridge. At the little summer-house in which Laura Fairlie and I had first seen each other, she stopped, and broke the silence which she had steadily maintained while we were walking together.

“What I have to say to you, I can say here.”

With those words, she entered the summer-house, took one of the chairs at the little round table inside, and signed to me to take the other. I had suspected what was coming when she spoke to me in the breakfast-room; I felt certain of it now.

“Mr. Hartright,” she said, “I am going to begin by making a frank avowal to you. I am going to say—without phrase-making, which I detest; or paying compliments, which I heartily despise—that I have come, in the course of your residence with us, to feel a strong friendly regard for you. I was predisposed in your favour when you first told me of your conduct towards that unhappy woman whom you met under such remarkable circumstances. Your management of the affair might not have been prudent; but it showed the self-control, the delicacy, and the compassion of a man who was naturally a gentleman. It made me expect good things from you; and you have not disappointed my expectations.”

She paused—but held up her hand at the same time, as a sign that she awaited no answer from me before she proceeded. When I entered the summer-house, no thought was in me of the woman in white. But, now, Miss Halcombe’s own words had put the memory of my adventure back in my mind. It remained there, throughout the interview—remained, and not without a result.

“As your friend,” she proceeded, “I



am going to tell you, at once, in my own plain, blunt, downright language, that I have discovered your secret—without help or hint, mind, from any one else. Mr. Hartright, you have thoughtlessly allowed yourself to form an attachment—a serious and devoted attachment, I am afraid—to my sister, Laura. I don't put you to the pain of confessing it, in so many words, because I see and know that you are too honest to deny it. I don't even blame you—I pity you for opening your heart to a hopeless affection. You have not attempted to take any underhand advantage—you have not spoken to my sister in secret. You are guilty of weakness and want of attention to your own best interests, but of nothing worse. If you had acted, in any single respect, less delicately and less modestly, I should have told you to leave the house, without an instant's notice, or an instant's consultation of anybody. As it is, I blame the misfortune of your years and your position—I don't blame *you*. Shake hands—I have given you pain; I am going to give you more; but there is no help for it—shake hands with your friend, Marian Halcombe, first."

The sudden kindness—the warm, high-minded, fearless sympathy which met me on such mercifully-equal terms, which appealed with such delicate and generous abruptness straight to my heart, my honour, and my courage, overcame me in an instant. I tried to look at her, when she took my hand, but my eyes were dim. I tried to thank her, but my voice failed me.

"Listen to me," she said, considerably avoiding all notice of my loss of self-control. "Listen to me, and let us get it over at once. It is a real, true relief to me that I am not obliged, in what I have now to say, to enter into the question—the hard and cruel question as I think it—of social inequalities. Circumstances which will try *you* to the quick, spare *me* the ungracious necessity of paining a man who has lived in friendly intimacy under the same roof with myself by any humiliating reference to matters of rank and station. You must leave Limmeridge House, Mr. Hartright, before more harm is done. It is

my duty to say that to you; and it would be equally my duty to say it, under precisely the same serious necessity, if you were the representative of the oldest and wealthiest family in England. You must leave us, not because you are a teacher of drawing ——"

She waited a moment; turned her face full on me; and, reaching across the table, laid her hand firmly on my arm.

"Not because you are a teacher of drawing," she repeated, "but because Laura Fairlie is engaged to be married."

The last word went like a bullet to my heart. My arm lost all sensation of the hand that grasped it. I never moved, and never spoke. The sharp autumn breeze that scattered the dead leaves at our feet, came as cold to me, on a sudden, as if my own mad hopes were dead leaves, too, whirled away by the wind like the rest. Hopes! Betrothed, or not betrothed, she was equally far from *me*. Would other men have remembered that in my place? Not if they had loved her as I did.

The pang passed; and nothing but the dull numbing pain of it remained. I felt Miss Halcombe's hand again, tightening its hold on my arm—I raised my head, and looked at her. Her large black eyes were rooted on me, watching the white change on my face, which I felt, and which she saw.

"Crush it!" she said. "Here, where you first saw her, crush it! Don't shrink under it like a woman. Tear it out; trample it under foot like a man!"

The suppressed vehemence with which she spoke; the strength which her will—concentrated in the look she fixed on me, and in the hold on my arm that she had not yet relinquished—communicated to mine, steadied me. We both waited for a minute, in silence. At the end of that time, I had justified her generous faith in my manhood; I had, outwardly at least, recovered my self-control.

"Are you yourself again?"

"Enough myself, Miss Halcombe, to ask your pardon and hers. Enough myself, to be guided by your advice, and to prove my gratitude in that way, if I can prove it



in no other.”

“You have proved it already,” she answered, “by those words. Mr. Hartright, concealment is at an end between us. I cannot affect to hide from *you*, what my sister has unconsciously shown to *me*. You must leave us for her sake, as well as for your own. Your presence here, your necessary intimacy with us, harmless as it has been, God knows, in all other respects, has unsteadied her and made her wretched. I, who love her better than my own life—I who have learnt to believe in that pure, noble, innocent nature as I believe in my religion—know but too well the secret misery of self-reproach that she has been suffering, since the first shadow of a feeling disloyal to her marriage engagement entered her heart in spite of her. I don’t say—it would be useless to attempt to say it, after what has happened—that her engagement has ever had a strong hold on her affections. It is an engagement of honour, not of love—her father sanctioned it on his death-bed, two years since—she herself neither welcomed it, nor shrank from it—she was content to make it. Till you came here, she was in the position of hundreds of other women, who marry men without being greatly attracted to them or greatly repelled by them, and who learn to love them (when they don’t learn to hate!) after marriage, instead of before. I hope more earnestly than words can say—and you should have the self-sacrificing courage to hope too—that the new thoughts and feelings which have disturbed the old calmness and the old content, have not taken root too deeply to be ever removed. Your absence (if I had less belief in your honour, and your courage, and your sense, I should not trust to them as I am trusting now)—your absence will help my efforts; and time will help us all three. It is something to know that my first confidence in you was not all misplaced. It is something to know that you will not be less honest, less manly, less considerate towards the pupil whose relation to yourself you have had the misfortune to forget, than towards the stranger and the outcast whose appeal to

you was not made in vain.”

Again the chance reference to the woman in white! Was there no possibility of speaking of Miss Fairlie and of me without raising the memory of Anne Catherick, and setting her between us like a fatality that it was hopeless to avoid?

“Tell me what apology I can make to Mr. Fairlie for breaking my engagement,” I said. “Tell me when to go after that apology is accepted. I promise implicit obedience to you and to your advice.”

“Time is, every way, of importance,” she answered. “You heard me refer this morning to Monday next, and to the necessity of setting the purple room in order. The visitor whom we expect on Monday ——”

I could not wait for her to be more explicit. Knowing what I knew now, the memory of Miss Fairlie’s look and manner at the breakfast-table told me that the expected visitor at Limmeridge House was her future husband. I tried to force it back; but something rose within me at that moment stronger than my own will; and I interrupted Miss Halcombe.

“Let me go to-day,” I said, bitterly. “The sooner the better.”

“No; not to-day,” she replied. “The only reason you can assign to Mr. Fairlie for your departure, before the end of your engagement, must be that an unforeseen necessity compels you to ask his permission to return at once to London. You must wait till to-morrow to tell him that, at the time when the post comes in, because he will then understand the sudden change in your plans, by associating it with the arrival of a letter from London. It is miserable and sickening to descend to deceit, even of the most harmless kind—but I know Mr. Fairlie, and if you once excite his suspicions that you are trifling with him, he will refuse to release you. Speak to him on Friday morning; occupy yourself afterwards (for the sake of your own interests with your employer), in leaving your unfinished work in as little confusion as possible; and quit this place on Saturday. It will be time enough, then,



Mr. Hartright, for you, and for all of us.”

Before I could assure her that she might depend on my acting in the strictest accordance with her wishes, we were both startled by advancing footsteps in the shrubbery. Some one was coming from the house to seek for us! I felt the blood rush into my cheeks, and then leave them again. Could the third person who was fast approaching us, at such a time and under such circumstances, be Miss Fairlie?

It was a relief—so sadly, so hopelessly was my position towards her changed already—it was absolutely a relief to me, when the person who had disturbed us appeared at the entrance of the summer-house, and proved to be only Miss Fairlie’s maid.

“Could I speak to you for a moment, miss?” said the girl, in rather a flurried, unsettled manner.

Miss Halcombe descended the steps into the shrubbery, and walked aside a few paces with the maid.

Left by myself, my mind reverted, with a sense of forlorn wretchedness which it is not in any words that I can find to describe, to my approaching return to the solitude and the despair of my lonely London home. Thoughts of my kind old mother, and of my sister, who had rejoiced with her so innocently over my prospects in Cumberland—thoughts whose long banishment from my heart it was now my shame and my reproach to realise for the first time—came back to me with the loving mournfulness of old, neglected friends. My mother and my sister, what would they feel when I returned to them from my broken engagement, with the confession of my miserable secret—they who had parted from me so hopefully on that last happy night in the Hampstead cottage!

Anne Catherick again! Even the memory of the farewell evening with my mother and my sister could not return to me now, unconnected with that other memory of the moonlight walk back to London. What did it mean? Were that woman and I to meet once more? It was possible, at the least. Did she know that I

lived in London? Yes; I had told her so, either before or after that strange question of hers, when she had asked me so distrustfully if I knew many men of the rank of Baronet. Either before or after—my mind was not calm enough, then, to remember which.

A few minutes elapsed before Miss Halcombe dismissed the maid and came back to me. She, too, looked flurried and unsettled, now.

“We have arranged all that is necessary, Mr. Hartright,” she said. “We have understood each other, as friends should; and we may go back at once to the house. To tell you the truth, I am uneasy about Laura. She has sent to say she wants to see me directly; and the maid reports that her mistress is apparently very much agitated by a letter that she has received this morning—the same letter, no doubt, which I sent on to the house before we came here.”

We retraced our steps together hastily along the shrubbery path. Although Miss Halcombe had ended all that she thought it necessary to say, on her side, I had not ended all that I wanted to say on mine. From the moment when I had discovered that the expected visitor at Limmeridge was Miss Fairlie’s future husband, I had felt a bitter curiosity, a burning envious eagerness, to know who he was. It was possible that a future opportunity of putting the question might not easily offer; so I risked asking it on our way back to the house.

“Now that you are kind enough to tell me we have understood each other, Miss Halcombe,” I said; “now that you are sure of my gratitude for your forbearance and my obedience to your wishes, may I venture to ask who”—(I hesitated; I had forced myself to think of him, but it was harder still to speak of him, as her promised husband)—“who the gentleman engaged to Miss Fairlie, is?”

Her mind was evidently occupied with the message she had received from her sister. She answered, in a hasty, absent way:

“A gentleman of large property, in



Hampshire.”

Hampshire! Anne Catherick’s native place. Again, and yet again, the woman in white. There *was* a fatality in it.

“And his name?” I said, as quietly and indifferently as I could.

“Sir Percival Glyde.”

Sir—Sir Percival! Anne Catherick’s question—that suspicious question about the men of the rank of Baronet whom I might happen to know—had hardly been dismissed from my mind by Miss Halcombe’s return to me in the summer-house, before it was recalled again by her own answer. I stopped suddenly, and looked at her.

“Sir Percival Glyde,” she repeated, imagining that I had not heard her former reply.

“Knight, or Baronet?” I asked, with an agitation that I could hide no longer.

She paused for a moment, and then answered, rather coldly:

“Baronet, of course.”

