

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

ALL THE YEAR ROUND.

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THE WOMAN IN WHITE.

MISS HALCOMBE'S NARRATIVE CONTINUED.

JULY 4TH. The misery of self-reproach which I suffered, yesterday evening, on hearing what Laura told me in the boat-house, returned in the loneliness of the night, and kept me waking and wretched for hours.

I lighted the candle at last, and searched through my old journals to see what my share in the fatal error of her marriage had really been, and what I might have once done to save her from it. The result soothed me a little—for it showed that, however blindly and ignorantly I acted, I acted for the best. Crying generally does me harm; but it was not so last night—I think it relieved me. I rose this morning with a settled resolution and a quiet mind. Nothing Sir Percival can say or do shall ever irritate me again, or make me forget, for one moment, that I am staying here, in defiance of mortifications, insults, and threats, for Laura's service and for Laura's sake.

The speculations in which we might have indulged, this morning, on the subject of the figure at the lake and the footsteps in the plantation, have been all suspended by a trifling accident which has caused Laura great regret. She has lost the little brooch I gave her for a keepsake, on the day before her marriage. As she wore it when we went out yesterday evening, we can only suppose that it must have dropped from her dress, either in the

boat-house, or on our way back. The servants have been sent to search, and have returned unsuccessful. And now Laura herself has just gone to look for it. Whether she finds it, or not, the loss will help to excuse her absence from the house, if Sir Percival returns before the letter from Mr. Gilmore's partner is placed in my hands.

One o'clock has just struck. I am considering whether I had better wait here for the arrival of the messenger from London, or slip away quietly, and watch for him outside the lodge gate.

My suspicion of everybody and everything in this house inclines me to think that the second plan may be the best. The Count is safe in the breakfast-room. I heard him, through the door, as I ran up-stairs, ten minutes since, exercising his canary-birds at their tricks:—"Come out on my little finger, my pret-pret-pretties! Come out, and hop up-stairs! One, two, three—and up! Three, two, one—and down! One, two, three—twit-twit-twit-tweet!" The birds burst into their usual ecstasy of singing, and the Count chirruped and whistled at them in return, as if he was a bird himself. My room door is open, and I can hear the shrill singing and whistling at this moment. If I am really to slip out, without being observed—now is my time.

Four o'clock. I come back to this journal, with sensations filling my mind which it would be useless for any woman to attempt to describe. The three hours



that have passed since I made my last entry, have turned the whole march of events at Blackwater Park in a new direction. Whether for good or for evil, I cannot and dare not decide.

Let me get back first to the place at which I left off—or I shall lose myself in the confusion of my own thoughts.

I went out, as I had proposed, to meet the messenger with my letter from London, at the lodge gate. On the stairs I saw no one. In the hall I heard the Count still exercising his birds. But on crossing the quadrangle outside, I passed Madame Fosco, walking by herself in her favourite circle, round and round the great fish-pond. I at once slackened my pace, so as to avoid all appearance of being in a hurry; and even went the length, for caution's sake, of inquiring if she thought of going out before lunch. She smiled at me in the friendliest manner—said she preferred remaining near the house—nodded pleasantly—and re-entered the hall. I looked back, and saw that she had closed the door before I had opened the wicket by the side of the carriage gates.

In less than a quarter of an hour, I reached the lodge.

The lane outside took a sudden turn to the left, ran on straight for a hundred yards or so, and then took another sharp turn to the right to join the high road. Between these two turns, hidden from the lodge on one side and from the way to the station on the other, I waited, walking backwards and forwards. High hedges were on either side of me; and, for twenty minutes by my watch, I neither saw nor heard anything. At the end of that time, the sound of a carriage caught my ear; and I was met, as I advanced towards the second turning, by a fly from the railway. I made a sign to the driver to stop. As he obeyed me, a respectable-looking man put his head out of the window to see what was the matter.

"I beg your pardon," I said; "but am I right in supposing that you are going to Blackwater Park?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"With a letter for any one?"

"With a letter for Miss Halcombe, ma'am."

"You may give me the letter. I am Miss Halcombe."

The man touched his hat, got out of the fly immediately, and gave me the letter.

I opened it at once; and read these lines. I copy them here (without the address to me, or the writer's signature); thinking it best to destroy the original for caution's sake.

"DEAR MADAM. Your letter, received this morning, has caused me very great anxiety. I will reply to it as briefly and plainly as possible.

"My careful consideration of the statement made by yourself, and my knowledge of Lady Glyde's position, as defined in the settlement, lead me, I regret to say, to the conclusion that a loan of the trust money to Sir Percival (or, in other words, a loan of some portion of the twenty thousand pounds of Lady Glyde's fortune), is in contemplation, and that she is made a party to the deed, in order to secure her approval of a flagrant breach of trust, and to have her signature produced against her, if she should complain hereafter. It is impossible, on any other supposition, to account, situated as she is, for her execution to a deed of any kind being wanted at all.

"In the event of Lady Glyde's signing such a document as I am compelled to suppose the deed in question to be, her trustees would be at liberty to advance money to Sir Percival out of her twenty thousand pounds. If the amount so lent should not be paid back, and if Lady Glyde should have children, their fortune would then be diminished by the sum, large or small, so advanced. In plainer terms still, the transaction, for anything Lady Glyde knows to the contrary, may be a fraud upon her unborn children.

"Under these serious circumstances, I would recommend Lady Glyde to assign as a reason for withholding her signature, that she wishes the deed to be first submitted to myself, as her family solicitor



(in the absence of my partner, Mr. Gilmore). No reasonable objection can be made to taking this course—for, if the transaction is an honourable one, there will necessarily be no difficulty in my giving my approval.

“Sincerely assuring you of my readiness to afford any additional help or advice that may be wanted, I beg to remain, Madam, your faithful servant,

“_____”

I read this kind and sensible letter very thankfully. It supplied Laura with a reason for objecting to the signature which was unanswerable, and which we could both of us understand. The messenger waited near me while I was reading, to receive his directions when I had done.

“Will you be good enough to say that I understand the letter, and that I am very much obliged?” I said. “There is no other reply necessary at present.”

Exactly at the moment when I was speaking those words, holding the letter open in my hand, Count Fosco turned the corner of the lane from the high road, and stood before me as if he had sprung up out of the earth.

The suddenness of his appearance, in the very last place under heaven in which I should have expected to see him, took me completely by surprise. The messenger wished me good morning, and got into the fly again. I could not say a word to him—I was not even able to return his bow. The conviction that I was discovered—and by that man, of all others—absolutely petrified me.

“Are you going back to the house, Miss Halcombe?” he inquired, without showing the least surprise on his side, and without even looking after the fly, which drove off while he was speaking to me.

I collected myself sufficiently to make a sign in the affirmative.

“I am going back, too,” he said. “Pray allow me the pleasure of accompanying you. Will you take my arm? You look surprised at seeing me!”

I took his arm. The first of my

scattered senses that came back, was the sense that warned me to sacrifice anything rather than make an enemy of him.

“You look surprised at seeing me!” he repeated, in his quietly pertinacious way.

“I thought, Count, I heard you with your birds in the breakfast-room,” I answered, as quietly and firmly as I could.

“Surely. But my little feathered children, dear lady, are only too like other children. They have their days of perversity; and this morning was one of them. My wife came in, as I was putting them back in their cage, and said she had left you going out alone for a walk. You told her so, did you not?”

“Certainly.”

“Well, Miss Halcombe, the pleasure of accompanying you was too great a temptation for me to resist. At my age there is no harm in confessing so much as that, is there? I seized my hat, and set off to offer myself as your escort. Even so fat an old man as Fosco is surely better than no escort at all? I took the wrong path—I came back, in despair—and here I am arrived (may I say it?) at the height of my wishes.”

He talked on, in this complimentary strain, with a fluency which left me no exertion to make beyond the effort of maintaining my composure. He never referred in the most distant manner to what he had seen in the lane, or to the letter which I still had in my hand. This ominous discretion helped to convince me that he must have surprised, by the most dishonourable means, the secret of my application in Laura’s interests, to the lawyer; and that, having now assured himself of the private manner in which I had received the answer, he had discovered enough to suit his purposes, and was only bent on trying to quiet the suspicions which he knew he must have aroused in my mind. I was wise enough, under these circumstances, not to attempt to deceive him by plausible explanations—and woman enough, notwithstanding my dread of him, to feel as if my hand was



tainted by resting on his arm.

On the drive in front of the house we met the dog-cart being taken round to the stables. Sir Percival had just returned. He came out to meet us at the house-door. Whatever other results his journey might have had, it had not ended in softening his savage temper.

"Oh! here are two of you come back," he said, with a lowering face. "What is the meaning of the house being deserted in this way? Where is Lady Glyde?"

I told him of the loss of the brooch, and said that Laura had gone into the plantation to look for it.

"Brooch or no brooch," he growled, sulkily, "I recommend her not to forget her appointment in the library, this afternoon. I shall expect to see her in half an hour."

I took my hand from the Count's arm, and slowly ascended the steps. He honoured me with one of his magnificent bows; and then addressed himself gaily to the scowling master of the house.

"Tell me, Percival," he said, "have you had a pleasant drive? And has your pretty shining Brown Molly come back at all tired?"

"Brown Molly be hanged—and the drive, too! I want my lunch."

"And I want five minutes' talk with you, Percival, first," returned the Count. "Five minutes' talk, my friend, here on the grass."

"What about?"

"About business that very much concerns you."

I lingered long enough, in passing through the hall-door, to hear this question and answer, and to see Sir Percival thrust his hands into his pockets, in sullen hesitation.

"If you want to badger me with any more of your infernal scruples," he said, "I, for one, won't hear them. I want my lunch!"

"Come out here, and speak to me," repeated the Count, still perfectly uninfluenced by the rudest speech that his friend could make to him.

Sir Percival descended the steps. The Count took him by the arm, and walked him away gently. The "business," I was sure, referred to the question of the signature. They were speaking of Laura and of me, beyond a doubt. I felt heart-sick and faint with anxiety. It might be of the last importance to both of us to know what they were saying to each other at that moment—and not one word of it could, by any possibility, reach my ears.

I walked about the house, from room to room, with the lawyer's letter in my bosom (I was afraid, by this time, even to trust it under lock and key), till the oppression of my suspense half maddened me. There were no signs of Laura's return; and I thought of going out to look for her. But my strength was so exhausted by the trials and anxieties of the morning, that the heat of the day quite overpowered me; and, after an attempt to get to the door, I was obliged to return to the drawing-room, and lie down on the nearest sofa to recover.

I was just composing myself, when the door opened softly, and the Count looked in.

"A thousand pardons, Miss Halcombe," he said; "I only venture to disturb you because I am the bearer of good news. Percival—who is capricious in everything, as you know—has seen fit to alter his mind, at the last moment; and the business of the signature is put off for the present. A great relief to all of us, Miss Halcombe, as I see with pleasure in your face. Pray present my best respects and felicitations, when you mention this pleasant change of circumstances to Lady Glyde."

He left me before I had recovered my astonishment. There could be no doubt that this extraordinary alteration of purpose in the matter of the signature, was due to his influence; and that his discovery of my application to London yesterday, and of my having received an answer to it to-day, had offered him the means of interfering with certain success.

I felt these impressions; but my mind seemed to share the exhaustion of



my body, and I was in no condition to dwell on them, with any useful reference to the doubtful present, or the threatening future. I tried a second time to run out, and find Laura; but my head was giddy, and my knees trembled under me. There was no choice but to give it up again, and return to the sofa, sorely against my will.

The quiet in the house, and the low murmuring hum of summer insects outside the open window, soothed me. My eyes closed of themselves; and I passed gradually into a strange condition, which was not waking—for I knew nothing of what was going on about me; and not sleeping—for I was conscious of my own repose. In this state, my fevered mind broke loose from me, while my weary body was at rest; and, in a trance, or day-dream of my fancy—I know not what to call it—I saw Walter Hartright. I had not thought of him, since I rose that morning; Laura had not said one word to me either directly or indirectly referring to him—and yet, I saw him now, as plainly as if the past time had returned, and we were both together again at Limmeridge House.

He appeared to me as one among many other men, none of whose faces I could plainly discern. They were all lying on the steps of an immense ruined temple. Colossal tropical trees—with rank creepers twining endlessly about their trunks, and hideous stone idols glimmering and grinning at intervals behind leaves and stalks and branches—surrounded the temple, and shut out the sky, and threw a dismal shadow over the forlorn band of men on the steps. White exhalations twisted and curled up stealthily from the ground; approached the men in wreaths, like smoke; touched them; and stretched them out dead, one by one, in the places where they lay. An agony of pity and fear for Walter loosened my tongue, and I implored him to escape. “Come back! come back!” I said. “Remember your promise to *her* and to *me*. Come back to us, before the Pestilence reaches you, and lays you dead like the rest!”

He looked at me, with an unearthly

quiet in his face. “Wait,” he said. “I shall come back. The night, when I met the lost Woman on the highway, was the night which set my life apart to be the instrument of a Design that is yet unseen. Here, lost in the wilderness, or there, welcomed back in the land of my birth, I am still walking on the dark road which leads me, and you, and the sister of your love and mine, to the unknown Retribution and the inevitable End. Wait and look. The Pestilence which touches the rest, will pass *me*.”

I saw him again. He was still in the forest; and the numbers of his lost companions had dwindled to very few. The temple was gone, and the idols were gone—and, in their place, the figures of dark, dwarfish men lurked murderously among the trees, with bows in their hands, and arrows fitted to the string. Once more, I feared for Walter, and cried out to warn him. Once more, he turned to me, with the immovable quiet in his face. “Another step,” he said, “on the dark road. Wait and look. The arrows that strike the rest, will spare *me*.”

I saw him for the third time, in a wrecked ship, stranded on a wild, sandy shore. The overloaded boats were making away from him for the land, and he alone was left, to sink with the ship. I cried to him to hail the hindmost boat, and to make a last effort for his life. The quiet face looked at me in return, and the unmoved voice gave me back the changeless reply. “Another step on the journey. Wait and look. The Sea which drowns the rest, will spare *me*.”

I saw him for the last time. He was kneeling by a tomb of white marble; and the shadow of a veiled woman rose out of the grave beneath, and waited by his side. The unearthly quiet of his face had changed to an unearthly sorrow. But the terrible certainty of his words remained the same. “Darker and darker,” he said; “farther and farther yet. Death takes the good, the beautiful, and the young—and spares *me*. The Pestilence that wastes, the Arrow that strikes, the Sea that drowns, the Grave that closes over Love and Hope,



are steps of my journey, and take me nearer and nearer to the End.”

My heart sank under a dread beyond words, under a grief beyond tears. The darkness closed round the pilgrim at the marble tomb; closed round the veiled woman from the grave; closed round the dreamer who looked on them. I saw and heard no more.

I was aroused by a hand laid on my shoulder. It was Laura’s.

She had dropped on her knees by the side of the sofa. Her face was flushed and agitated; and her eyes met mine in a wild bewildered manner. I started up the instant I saw her.

“What has happened?” I asked.
“What has frightened you?”

She looked round at the half-open door—put her lips close to my ear—and answered in a whisper:

“Marian!—the figure at the lake—the footsteps last night—I’ve just seen her! I’ve just spoken to her!”

“Who, for Heaven’s sake?”

“Anne Catherick.”

