

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

ALL THE YEAR ROUND.

A WEEKLY JOURNAL.

CONDUCTED BY CHARLES DICKENS.

WITH WHICH IS INCORPORATED HOUSEHOLD WORDS.

N^o. 48.]

SATURDAY, MARCH 24, 1860

[PRICE 2*d*.

THE WOMAN IN WHITE.

MISS HALCOMBE'S NARRATIVE CONTINUED.

JULY 4TH. I was so startled by the disturbance in Laura's face and manner, and so dismayed by the first waking impressions of my dream, that I was not fit to bear the revelation which burst upon me, when the name of Anne Catherick passed her lips. I could only stand rooted to the floor, looking at her in breathless silence.

She was too much absorbed by what had happened to notice the effect which her reply had produced on me. “I have seen Anne Catherick! I have spoken to Anne Catherick!” she repeated, as if I had not heard her. “Oh, Marian, I have such things to tell you! Come away—we may be interrupted here—come at once into my room!”

With those eager words, she caught me by the hand, and led me through the library, to the end room on the ground floor, which had been fitted up for her own especial use. No third person, except her maid, could have any excuse for surprising us here. She pushed me in before her, locked the door, and drew the chintz curtains that hung over the inside.

The strange, stunned feeling which had taken possession of me still remained. But a growing conviction that the complications which had long threatened to gather about her, and to gather about me, had suddenly closed fast round us both, was now beginning to penetrate my

mind. I could not express it in words—I could hardly even realise it dimly in my own thoughts. “Anne Catherick!” I whispered to myself, with useless, helpless reiteration—“Anne Catherick!”

Laura drew me to the nearest seat, an ottoman in the middle of the room. “Look!” she said; “look here!”—and pointed to the bosom of her dress.

I saw, for the first time, that the lost brooch was pinned in its place again. There was something real in the sight of it, something real in the touching of it afterwards, which seemed to steady the whirl and confusion in my thoughts, and to help me to compose myself.

“Where did you find your brooch?” The first words I could say to her were the words which put that trivial question at that important moment.

“*She* found it, Marian.”

“Where?”

“On the floor of the boat-house. Oh, how shall I begin—how shall I tell you about it! She talked to me so strangely—she looked so fearfully ill—she left me so suddenly——!”

Her voice rose as the tumult of her recollections pressed upon her mind. The inveterate distrust which weighs, night and day, on my spirits in this house, instantly roused me to warn her—just as the sight of the brooch had roused me to question her, the moment before.

“Speak low,” I said. “The window is open, and the garden path runs beneath it. Begin at the beginning, Laura. Tell me, word for word, what passed between that



woman and you.”

“Shall I close the window first?”

“No; only speak low: only remember that Anne Catherick is a dangerous subject under your husband’s roof. Where did you first see her?”

“At the boat-house, Marian. I went out, as you know, to find my brooch; and I walked along the path through the plantation, looking down on the ground carefully at every step. In that way I got on, after a long time, to the boat-house; and, as soon as I was inside it, I went on my knees to hunt over the floor. I was still searching, with my back to the doorway, when I heard a soft, strange voice, behind me, say, ‘Miss Fairlie.’”

“Miss Fairlie!”

“Yes—my old name—the dear, familiar name that I thought I had parted from for ever. I started up—not frightened, the voice was too kind and gentle to frighten anybody—but very much surprised. There, looking at me from the doorway, stood a woman, whose face I never remembered to have seen before——”

“How was she dressed?”

“She had a neat, pretty white gown on, and over it a poor worn thin dark shawl. Her bonnet was of brown straw, as poor and worn as the shawl. I was struck by the difference between her gown and the rest of her dress, and she saw that I noticed it. ‘Don’t look at my bonnet and shawl,’ she said, speaking in a quick, breathless, sudden way; ‘if I mustn’t wear white, I don’t care what I wear. Look at my gown, as much as you please; I’m not ashamed of that.’ Very strange, was it not? Before I could say anything to soothe her, she held out one of her hands, and I saw my brooch in it. I was so pleased and so grateful, that I went quite close to her to say what I really felt. ‘Are you thankful enough to do me one little kindness?’ she asked. ‘Yes, indeed,’ I answered; ‘any kindness in my power I shall be glad to show you.’ ‘Then let me pin your brooch on for you, now I have found it.’ Her request was so unexpected, Marian, and she made it with such extraordinary

eagerness, that I drew back a step or two, not well knowing what to do. ‘Ah!’ she said, ‘your mother would have let me pin on the brooch.’ There was something in her voice and her look, as well as in her mentioning my mother in that reproachful manner, which made me ashamed of my distrust. I took her hand with the brooch in it, and put it up gently on the bosom of my dress. ‘You knew my mother?’ I said. ‘Was it very long ago? have I ever seen you before?’ Her hands were busy fastening the brooch: she stopped and pressed them against my breast. ‘You don’t remember a fine spring day at Limmeridge,’ she said, ‘and your mother walking down the path that led to the school, with a little girl on each side of her? I have had nothing else to think of since; and I remember it. You were one of the little girls, and I was the other. Pretty, clever Miss Fairlie, and poor dazed Anne Catherick were nearer to each other, then, than they are now!’——”

“Did you remember her, Laura, when she told you her name?”

“Yes—I remembered your asking me about Anne Catherick at Limmeridge, and your saying that she had once been considered like me.”

“What reminded you of that, Laura?”

“*She* reminded me. While I was looking at her, while she was very close to me, it came over my mind suddenly that we were like each other! Her face was pale and thin and weary—but the sight of it startled me, as if it had been the sight of my own face in the glass after a long illness. The discovery—I don’t know why—gave me such a shock, that I was perfectly incapable of speaking to her, for the moment.”

“Did she seem hurt by your silence?”

“I am afraid she was hurt by it. ‘You have not got your mother’s face,’ she said, ‘or your mother’s heart. Your mother’s face was dark; and your mother’s heart, Miss Fairlie, was the heart of an angel.’ ‘I am sure I feel kindly towards you,’ I said, ‘though I may not be able to express it as I ought. Why do you call me Miss Fairlie—?’ ‘Because I love the name of Fairlie and



hate the name of Glyde,' she broke out, violently. I had seen nothing like madness in her before this; but I fancied I saw it now in her eyes. 'I only thought you might not know I was married,' I said, remembering the wild letter she wrote to me at Limmeridge, and trying to quiet her. She sighed bitterly, and turned away from me. 'Not know you were married!' she repeated. 'I am here *because* you are married. I am here to make atonement to you, before I meet your mother in the world beyond the grave.' She drew farther and farther away from me, till she was out of the boat-house—and, then, she watched and listened for a little while. When she turned round to speak again, instead of coming back, she stopped where she was, looking in at me, with a hand on each side of the entrance. 'Did you see me at the lake last night?' she said. 'Did you hear me following you in the wood? I have been waiting for days together to speak to you alone—I have left the only friend I have in the world, anxious and frightened about me—I have risked being shut up again in the madhouse—and all for your sake, Miss Fairlie, all for your sake.' Her words alarmed me, Marian; and yet, there was something in the way she spoke, that made me pity her with all my heart. I am sure my pity must have been sincere, for it made me bold enough to ask the poor creature to come in, and sit down in the boat-house, by my side."

"Did she do so?"

"No. She shook her head, and told me she must stop where she was, to watch and listen, and see that no third person surprised us. And from first to last, there she waited at the entrance, with a hand on each side of it; sometimes bending in suddenly to speak to me; sometimes drawing back suddenly to look about her. 'I was here yesterday,' she said, 'before it came dark; and I heard you, and the lady with you, talking together. I heard you tell her about your husband. I heard you say you had no influence to make him believe you, and no influence to keep him silent. Ah! I knew what those words meant; my conscience told me while I was listening.

Why did I ever let you marry him! Oh, my fear—my mad, miserable, wicked fear!—' She covered up her face in her poor worn shawl, and moaned and murmured to herself behind it. I began to be afraid she might break out into some terrible despair which neither she nor I could master. 'Try to quiet yourself,' I said; 'try to tell me how you might have prevented my marriage.' She took the shawl from her face, and looked at me vacantly. 'I ought to have had heart enough to stop at Limmeridge,' she answered. 'I ought never to have let the news of his coming there frighten me away. I ought to have warned you and saved you before it was too late. Why did I only have courage enough to write you that letter? Why did I only do harm, when I wanted and meant to do good? Oh, my fear—my mad, miserable, wicked fear!' She repeated those words again, and hid her face again in the end of her poor worn shawl. It was dreadful to see her, and dreadful to hear her."

"Surely, Laura, you asked what the fear was which she dwelt on so earnestly?"

"Yes; I asked that."

"And what did she say?"

"She asked me, in return, if I should not be afraid of a man who had shut me up in a madhouse, and who would shut me up again, if he could? I said, 'Are you afraid still? Surely you would not be here, if you were afraid now?' 'No,' she said, 'I am not afraid now.' I asked why not. She suddenly bent forward into the boat-house, and said, 'Can't you guess why?' I shook my head. 'Look at me,' she went on. I told her I was grieved to see that she looked very sorrowful and very ill. She smiled, for the first time. 'Ill?' she repeated; 'I'm dying. You know why I'm not afraid of him now. Do you think I shall meet your mother in heaven? Will she forgive me, if I do?' I was so shocked and so startled, that I could make no reply. 'I have been thinking of it,' she went on, 'all the time I have been in hiding from your husband, all the time I lay ill. My thoughts have driven me here—I want to make atonement—I want to undo all I can of the harm I once did.' I begged her as earnestly



as I could to tell me what she meant. She still looked at me with fixed, vacant eyes. ‘*Shall* I undo the harm?’ she said to herself, doubtfully. ‘You have friends to take your part. If *you* know his wicked secret, he will be afraid of you; he won’t dare use you as he used me. He must treat you mercifully for his own sake, if he is afraid of you and your friends. And if he treats you mercifully, and if I can say it was my doing——’ I listened eagerly for more; but she stopped at those words.”

“You tried to make her go on?”

“I tried; but she only drew herself away from me again, and leaned her face and arms against the side of the boat-house. ‘Oh!’ I heard her say, with a dreadful, distracted tenderness in her voice, ‘oh! if I could only be buried with your mother! If I could only wake at her side, when the angel’s trumpet sounds, and the graves give up their dead at the resurrection!’—Marian! I trembled from head to foot—it was horrible to hear her. ‘But there is no hope of that,’ she said, moving a little, so as to look at me again; ‘no hope for a poor stranger like me. *I* shall not rest under the marble cross that I washed with my own hands, and made so white and pure for her sake. Oh no! oh no! God’s mercy, not man’s, will take me to her, where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest.’ She spoke those words quietly and sorrowfully, with a heavy, hopeless sigh; and then waited a little. Her face was confused and troubled; she seemed to be thinking, or trying to think. ‘What was it I said just now?’ she asked, after a while. ‘When your mother is in my mind, everything else goes out of it. What was I saying? what was I saying?’ I reminded the poor creature, as kindly and delicately as I could. ‘Ah, yes, yes,’ she said, still in a vacant, perplexed manner. ‘You are helpless with your wicked husband. Yes. And I must do what I have come to do here—I must make it up to you for having been afraid to speak out at a better time.’ ‘What *is* it you have to tell me?’ I asked. ‘A Secret,’ she answered. ‘The Secret that your cruel husband is afraid of.’ Her face

darkened; and a hard, angry stare fixed herself in her eyes. She began waving her hand at me in a strange, unmeaning manner. ‘My mother knows the Secret,’ she said, speaking slowly for the first time; weighing every word as she uttered it. ‘My mother has wasted and worn away under the Secret half her lifetime. One day, when I was grown up, she told it to *me*. And your husband knew she told it. Knew, to my cost. Ah, poor me! knew, knew, knew she told it.’”

“Yes! yes! What did she say next?”

“She stopped again, Marian, at that point——”

“And said no more?”

“And listened eagerly. ‘Hush!’ she whispered, still waving her hand at me. ‘Hush!’ She moved aside out of the doorway, moved slowly and stealthily, step by step, till I lost her past the edge of the boat-house.”

“Surely, you followed her?”

“Yes; my anxiety made me bold enough to rise and follow her. Just as I reached the entrance, she appeared again, suddenly, round the side of the boat-house. ‘The secret,’ I whispered to her—‘wait and tell me the secret!’ She caught hold of my arm, and looked at me, with wild, frightened eyes. ‘Not now,’ she said; ‘we are not alone—we are watched. Come here to-morrow, at this time—by yourself—mind—by yourself.’ She pushed me roughly into the boat-house again; and I saw her no more.”

“Oh, Laura, Laura, another chance lost! If I had only been near you, she should not have escaped us. On which side did you lose sight of her?”

“On the left side, where the ground sinks and the wood is thickest.”

“Did you run out again? did you call after her?”

“How could I? I was too terrified to move or speak.”

“But when you *did* move—when you came out——?”

“I ran back here, to tell you what had happened.”

“Did you see any one, or hear any one in the plantation?”



“No—it seemed to be all still and quiet, when I passed through it.”

I waited for a moment, to consider. Was this third person, supposed to have been secretly present at the interview, a reality, or the creature of Anne Catherick’s excited fancy? It was impossible to determine. The one thing certain was, that we had failed again on the very brink of discovery—failed utterly and irretrievably, unless Anne Catherick kept her appointment at the boat-house, for the next day.

“Are you quite sure you have told me everything that passed? Every word that was said?” I inquired.

“I think so,” she answered. “My powers of memory, Marian, are not like yours. But I was so strongly impressed, so deeply interested, that nothing of any importance can possibly have escaped me.”

“My dear Laura, the merest trifles are of importance where Anne Catherick is concerned. Think again. Did no chance reference escape her as to the place in which she is living at the present time?”

“None that I can remember.”

“Did she not mention a companion and friend—a woman named Mrs. Clements?”

“Oh, yes! yes! I forgot that. She told me Mrs. Clements wanted sadly to go with her to the lake, and take care of her, and begged and prayed that she would not venture into this neighbourhood alone.”

“Was that all she said about Mrs. Clements?”

“Yes, that was all.”

“She told you nothing about the place in which she took refuge after leaving Todd’s Corner?”

“Nothing—I am quite sure.”

“Nor where she has lived since? Nor what her illness had been?”

“No, Marian; not a word. Tell me, pray tell me, what you think about it. I don’t know what to think, or what to do next.”

“You must do this, my love: You must carefully keep the appointment at the boat-house, to-morrow. It is impossible

to say what interests may not depend on your seeing that woman again. You shall not be left to yourself a second time. I will follow you, at a safe distance. Nobody shall see me; but I will keep within hearing of your voice, if anything happens. Anne Catherick has escaped Walter Hartright, and has escaped *you*. Whatever happens, she shall not escape *me*.”

Laura’s eyes read mine attentively while I was speaking.

“You believe,” she said, “in this secret that my husband is afraid of?”

“I do believe in it.”

“Anne Catherick’s manner, Marian, was wild, her eyes were wandering and vacant, when she said those words. Would you trust her in other things?”

“I trust nothing, Laura, but my own observation of your husband’s conduct. I judge Anne Catherick’s words by his actions—and I believe there *is* a secret.”

I said no more, and got up to leave the room. Thoughts were troubling me, which I might have told her if we had spoken together longer, and which it might have been dangerous for her to know. The influence of the terrible dream from which she had awakened me, hung darkly and heavily over every fresh impression which the progress of her narrative produced on my mind. I felt the ominous Future, coming close; chilling me, with an unutterable awe; forcing on me the conviction of an unseen Design in the long series of complications which had now fastened round us. I thought of Hartright—as I saw him, in the body, when he said farewell; as I saw him, in the spirit, in my dream—and I, too, began to doubt now whether we were not advancing, blindfold, to an appointed and an inevitable End.

Leaving Laura to go up-stairs alone, I went out to look about me in the walks near the house. The circumstances under which Anne Catherick had parted from her, had made me secretly anxious to know how Count Fosco was passing the afternoon; and had rendered me secretly distrustful of the results of that solitary



journey from which Sir Percival had returned but a few hours since.

After looking for them in every direction, and discovering nothing, I returned to the house, and entered the different rooms on the ground floor, one after another. They were all empty. I came out again into the hall, and went up-stairs to return to Laura. Madame Fosco opened her door, as I passed it in my way along the passage; and I stopped to see if she could inform me of the whereabouts of her husband and Sir Percival. Yes; she had seen them both from her window more than an hour since. The Count had looked up, with his customary kindness, and had mentioned, with his habitual attention to her in the smallest trifles, that he and his friend were going out together for a long walk.

For a long walk! They had never yet been in each other's company with that object in my experience of them. Sir Percival cared for no exercise but riding; and the Count (except when he was polite enough to be my escort) cared for no exercise at all.

When I joined Laura again, I found that she had called to mind, in my absence, the impending question of the signature to the deed, which, in the interest of discussing her interview with Anne Catherick, we had hitherto overlooked. Her first words when I saw her, expressed her surprise at the absence of the expected summons to attend Sir Percival in the library.

"You may make your mind easy on that subject," I said. "For the present, at least, neither your resolution nor mine will be exposed to any further trial. Sir Percival has altered his plans: the business of the signature is put off."

"Put off?" Laura repeated, amazedly. "Who told you so?"

"My authority is Count Fosco. I believe it is to his interference that we are indebted for your husband's sudden change of purpose."

"It seems impossible, Marian. If the object of my signing was, as we suppose, to obtain money for Sir Percival that he

urgently wanted, how can the matter be put off?"

"I think, Laura, we have the means at hand of setting that doubt at rest. Have you forgotten the conversation that I heard between Sir Percival and the lawyer, as they were crossing the hall?"

"No; but I don't remember——"

"I do. There were two alternatives proposed. One, was to obtain your signature to the parchment. The other, was to gain time by giving bills at three months. The last resource is evidently the resource now adopted—and we may fairly hope to be relieved from our share in Sir Percival's embarrassments for some time to come."

"Oh, Marian, it sounds too good to be true!"

"Does it, my love? You complimented me on my ready memory not long since—but you seem to doubt it now. I will get my journal, and you shall see if I am right or wrong."

I went away and got the book at once. On looking back to the entry referring to the lawyer's visit, we found that my recollection of the two alternatives presented was accurately correct. It was almost as great a relief to my mind as to Laura's, to find that my memory had served me, on this occasion, as faithfully as usual. In the perilous uncertainty of our present situation, it is hard to say what future interests may not depend upon the regularity of the entries in my journal, and upon the reliability of my recollection at the time when I make them.

Laura's face and manner suggested to me that this last consideration had occurred to her as well as to myself. Any way, it is only a trifling matter; and I am almost ashamed to put it down here in writing—it seems to set the forlornness of our situation in such a miserably vivid light. We must have little indeed to depend on, when the discovery that my memory can still be trusted to serve us, is hailed as if it was the discovery of a new friend!

The first bell for dinner separated



us. Just as it had done ringing, Sir Percival and the Count returned from their walk. We heard the master of the house storming at the servant for being five minutes late; and the master's guest interposing, as usual, in the interests of propriety, patience, and peace.

* * * * *

The evening has come and gone. No extraordinary event has happened. But I have noticed certain peculiarities in the conduct of Sir Percival and the Count, which have sent me to my bed, feeling very anxious and uneasy about Anne Catherick, and about the results which to-morrow may produce.

I know enough by this time, to be sure that the aspect of Sir Percival which is the most false, and which, therefore, means the worst, is his polite aspect. That long walk with his friend had ended in improving his manners, especially towards his wife. To Laura's secret surprise and to my secret alarm, he called her by her Christian name, asked if she had heard lately from her uncle, inquired when Mrs. Vesey was to receive her invitation to Blackwater, and showed her so many other little attentions, that he almost recalled the days of his hateful courtship at Limmeridge House. This was a bad sign, to begin with; and I thought it more ominous still, that he should pretend, after dinner, to fall asleep in the drawing-room, and that his eyes should cunningly follow Laura and me, when he thought we neither of us suspected him. I have never had any doubt that his sudden journey by himself took him to Welmingham to question Mrs. Catherick—but the experience of to-night has made me fear that the expedition was not undertaken in vain, and that he has got the information which he unquestionably left us to collect. If I knew where Anne Catherick was to be found, I would be up to-morrow with sunrise, and warn her.

While the aspect under which Sir Percival presented himself, to-night, was unhappily but too familiar to me, the aspect under which the Count appeared was, on the other hand, entirely new in

my experience of him. He permitted me, this evening, to make his acquaintance, for the first time, in the character of a Man of Sentiment—of sentiment, as I believe, really felt, not assumed for the occasion.

For instance, he was quiet and subdued; his eyes and his voice expressed a restrained sensibility. He wore (as if there was some hidden connexion between his showiest finery and his deepest feeling) the most magnificent waistcoat he has yet appeared in—it was made of pale sea-green silk, and delicately trimmed with fine silver braid. His voice sank into the tenderest inflections, his smile expressed a thoughtful, fatherly admiration, whenever he spoke to Laura or to me. He pressed his wife's hand under the table, when she thanked him for trifling little attentions at dinner. He took wine with her. "Your health and happiness, my angel!" he said, with fond, glistening eyes. He eat little or nothing; and sighed, and said "Good Percival!" when his friend laughed at him. After dinner, he took Laura by the hand, and asked her if she would be "so sweet as to play to him." She complied, through sheer astonishment. He sat by the piano, with his watch-chain resting in folds, like a golden serpent, on the sea-green protuberance of his waistcoat. His immense head lay languidly on one side; and he gently beat time with two of his yellow-white fingers. He highly approved of the music, and tenderly admired Laura's manner of playing—not as poor Hartright used to praise it, with an innocent enjoyment of the sweet sounds, but with a clear, cultivated, practical knowledge of the merits of the composition, in the first place, and of the merits of the player's touch, in the second. As the evening closed in, he begged that the lovely dying light might not be profaned, just yet, by the appearance of the lamps. He came, with his horribly silent tread, to the distant window at which I was standing, to be out of his way and to avoid the very sight of him—he came to ask me to support his protest



against the lamps. If any one of them could only have burnt him up, at that moment, I would have gone down to the kitchen, and fetched it myself.

“Surely you like this modest, trembling English twilight?” he said, softly. “Ah! I love it. I feel my inborn admiration of all that is noble and great and good, purified by the breath of Heaven, on an evening like this. Nature has such imperishable charms, such inextinguishable tendernesses for me!—I am an old, fat man: talk which would become your lips, Miss Halcombe, sounds like a derision and a mockery on mine. It is hard to be laughed at in my moments of sentiment, as if my soul was like myself, old and overgrown. Observe, dear lady, what a light is dying on the trees! Does it penetrate your heart, as it penetrates mine?”

He paused—looked at me—and repeated the famous lines of Dante on the Evening-time, with a melody and tenderness which added a charm of their own to the matchless beauty of the poetry itself.

“Bah!” he cried suddenly, as the last cadence of those noble Italian words died away on his lips; “I make an old fool of myself, and only weary you all! Let us shut up the window in our bosoms and get back to the matter-of-fact world. Percival! I sanction the admission of the lamps. Lady Glyde — Miss Halcombe — Eleanor, my good wife—which of you will indulge me with a game at dominoes?”

He addressed us all; but he looked especially at Laura. She had learnt to feel my dread of offending him, and she accepted his proposal. It was more than I could have done, at that moment. I could not have sat down at the same table with him, for any consideration. His eyes seemed to reach my inmost soul through the thickening obscurity of the twilight. His voice trembled along every nerve in my body, and turned me hot and cold alternately. The mystery and terror of my dream, which had haunted me, at intervals, all through the evening, now oppressed my mind with an unendurable

foreboding and an unutterable awe. I saw the white tomb again, and the veiled woman rising out of it, by Hartright’s side. The thought of Laura welled up like a spring in the depths of my heart, and filled it with waters of bitterness, never, never known to it before. I caught her by the hand, as she passed me on her way to the table, and kissed her as if that night was to part us for ever. While they were all gazing at me in astonishment, I ran out through the low window which was open before me to the ground—ran out to hide from them in the darkness; to hide even from myself.

We separated, that evening, later than usual. Towards midnight, the summer silence was broken by the shuddering of a low, melancholy wind among the trees. We all felt the sudden chill in the atmosphere; but the Count was the first to notice the stealthy rising of the wind. He stopped while he was lighting my candle for me, and held up his hand warningly:

“Listen!” he said. “There will be a change to-morrow.”

First published 24 March 1860
All The Year Round Vol.II No.48 pp.501-506

