

“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. 65.]

SATURDAY, JULY 21, 1860.

[PRICE 2*d*.

THE WOMAN IN WHITE.

PART THE SECOND. HARTRIGHT'S NARRATIVE.

X.

THE Inquest was hurried for certain local reasons which weighed with the coroner and the town authorities. It was held on the afternoon of the next day. I was, necessarily, one among the witnesses.

My first proceeding, in the morning, was to go to the post-office, and inquire for the letter which I expected from Marian. No change of circumstances, however extraordinary, could affect the one great anxiety which weighed on my mind while I was away from London. The morning's letter, which was my only assurance that no misfortune had happened, was still the absorbing interest with which my day began.

To my relief, the letter from Marian was at the office waiting for me. Nothing had happened—they were both as safe and as well as when I had left them. Laura sent her love, and begged that I would let her know of my return, a day beforehand. Her sister added, in explanation of this message, that she had saved “nearly a sovereign” out of her own private purse, and that she had claimed the privilege of ordering the dinner and giving the dinner which was to celebrate the day of my return. I read these little domestic confidences, in the bright morning, with the terrible recollection of what had happened the evening before, vivid in my memory. The necessity of sparing Laura

any sudden knowledge of the truth was the first consideration which the letter suggested to me. I wrote at once to Marian, to tell her what I have told in these pages; presenting the tidings as gradually and gently as I could, and warning her not to let any such thing as a newspaper fall in Laura's way while I was absent. In the case of any other woman, less courageous and less reliable, I might have hesitated before I ventured on unreservedly disclosing the whole truth. But I owed it to Marian to be faithful to my past experience of her, and to trust her as I trusted myself.

My letter was necessarily long. It occupied me until the time for going to the Inquest.

The objects of the legal inquiry were necessarily beset by peculiar complications and difficulties. Besides the investigation into the manner in which the deceased had met his death, there were serious questions to be settled relating to the cause of the fire, to the abstraction of the keys, and to the presence of a stranger in the vestry at the time when the flames broke out. Even the identification of the dead man had not yet been accomplished. The helpless condition of the servant had made the police distrustful of his asserted recognition of his master. They had sent to Knowlesbury over-night to secure the attendance of witnesses who were well acquainted with the person of Sir Percival Glyde, and they had communicated, the first thing in the morning, with Blackwater Park. These precautions



enabled the coroner and jury to settle the question of identity, and to confirm the correctness of the servant's assertion; the evidence offered by competent witnesses, and by the discovery of certain facts, being strengthened by the dead man's watch. The crest and the name of Sir Percival Glyde were engraved inside it.

The next inquiries related to the fire.

The servant and I, and the boy who had heard the light struck in the vestry, were the first witnesses called. The boy gave his evidence clearly enough; but the servant's mind had not yet recovered the shock inflicted on it—he was plainly incapable of assisting the objects of the inquiry, and he was desired to stand down. To my own relief, my examination was not a long one. I had not known the deceased; I had never seen him; I was not aware of his presence at Old Welmingham; and I had not been in the vestry at the finding of the body. All I could prove was that I had stopped at the clerk's cottage to ask my way; that I had heard from him of the loss of the keys; that I had accompanied him to the church to render what help I could; that I had seen the fire; that I had heard some person unknown, inside the vestry, trying vainly to unlock the door; and that I had done what I could, from motives of humanity, to save the man. Other witnesses, who had been acquainted with the deceased, were asked if they could explain the mystery of his presumed abstraction of the keys, and his presence in the burning room. But the coroner seemed to take it for granted, naturally enough, that I, as a total stranger in the neighbourhood, and a total stranger to Sir Percival Glyde, could not be in a position to offer any evidence on these two points.

The course that I was myself bound to take, when my formal examination had closed, seemed clear to me. I did not feel called on to volunteer any statement of my own private convictions; in the first place, because my doing so could serve no practical purpose, now that all proof in support of any surmises of mine was burnt with the burnt register; in the second

place, because I could not have intelligibly stated my opinion—my unsupported opinion—without disclosing the whole story of the conspiracy; and producing the same unsatisfactory effect on the minds of the coroner and the jury which I had already produced on the mind of Mr. Kyrle.

In these pages, however, and after the time that has now elapsed, no such cautions and restraints as are here described, need fetter the free expression of my opinion. I will state, before my pen occupies itself with other events, how my own convictions lead me to account for the abstraction of the keys, for the outbreak of the fire, and for the death of the man.

The news of my being unexpectedly free on bail, drove Sir Percival, as I believe, to his last resources. The attempted attack on the road was one of those resources; and the suppression of all practical proof of his crime, by destroying the page of the register on which the forgery had been committed, was the other, and the surest of the two. If I could produce no extract from the original book, to compare with the certified copy at Knowlesbury, I could produce no positive evidence, and could threaten him with no fatal exposure. All that was necessary to his end was, that he should get into the vestry unperceived, that he should tear out the page in the register, and that he should leave the vestry again as privately as he had entered it.

On this supposition, it is easy to understand why he waited until nightfall before he made the attempt, and why he took advantage of the clerk's absence to possess himself of the keys. Necessity would oblige him to strike a light to find his way to the right register; and common caution would suggest his locking the door on the inside, in case of intrusion on the part of any inquisitive stranger, or on my part, if I happened to be in the neighbourhood at the time.

I cannot believe that it was any part of his intention to make the destruction of the register appear to be the result of accident, by purposely setting the vestry



on fire. The bare chance that prompt assistance might arrive, and that the books might, by the remotest possibility, be saved, would have been enough, on a moment's consideration, to dismiss any idea of this sort from his mind. Remembering the quantity of combustible objects in the vestry—the straw, the papers, the packing-cases, the dry wood, the old wormeaten presses—all the probabilities, in my estimation, point to the fire as the result of an accident with his matches or his light.

His first impulse, under these circumstances, was doubtless to try to extinguish the flames—and, failing in that, his second impulse (ignorant as he was of the state of the lock) had been to attempt to escape by the door which had given him entrance. When I had called to him, the flames must have extended across the door leading into the church, on either side of which the presses extended, and close to which the other combustible objects were placed. In all probability, the smoke and flame (confined as they were to the room) had been too much for him, when he tried to escape by the inner door. He must have dropped in his death-swoon—he must have sunk in the place where he was found—just as I got on the roof to break the skylight-window. Even if we had been able, afterwards, to get into the church, and to burst open the door from that side, the delay must have been fatal. He would have been past saving, long past saving, by that time. We should only have given the flames free ingress into the church: the church, which was now preserved, but which, in that event, would have shared the fate of the vestry. There is no doubt in my mind—there can be no doubt in the mind of any one—that he was a dead man before ever we got to the empty cottage, and worked with might and main to tear down the beam.

This is the nearest approach that any theory of mine can make towards accounting for a result which was visible matter of fact. As I have described them, so events passed to us outside. As I have related it, so his body was found.

The Inquest was adjourned over one day; no explanation that the eye of the law could recognise having been discovered, thus far, to account for the mysterious circumstances of the case.

It was arranged that more witnesses should be summoned, and that the London solicitor of the deceased should be invited to attend. A medical man was also charged with the duty of reporting on the mental condition of the servant, which appeared at present to debar him from giving any evidence of the least importance. He could only declare, in a dazed way, that he had been ordered, on the night of the fire, to wait in the lane, and that he knew nothing else, except that the deceased was certainly his master. My own impression was, that he had been first used (without any guilty knowledge on his own part) to ascertain the fact of the clerk's absence from home on the previous day; and that he had been afterwards ordered to wait near the church (but out of sight of the vestry) to assist his master, in the event of my escaping the attack on the road, and of a collision occurring between Sir Percival and myself. It is necessary to add, that the man's own testimony was never obtained to confirm this view. The medical report of him declared that what little mental faculty he possessed was seriously shaken; nothing satisfactory was extracted from him at the adjourned Inquest; and, for aught I know to the contrary, he may never have recovered to this day.

I returned to the hotel at Welmingham, so jaded in body and mind, so weakened and depressed by all that I had gone through, as to be quite unfit to endure the local gossip about the Inquest, and to answer the trivial questions that the talkers addressed to me in the coffee-room. I withdrew from my scanty dinner to my cheap garret-chamber, to secure myself a little quiet, and to think, undisturbed, of Laura and Marian.

If I had been a richer man, I would have gone back to London, and would have comforted myself with a sight of the two dear faces again, that night. But, I



was bound to appear, if called on, at the adjourned Inquest, and doubly bound to answer my bail before the magistrate at Knowlesbury. Our slender resources had suffered already; and the doubtful future—more doubtful than ever now—made me dread decreasing our means, by allowing myself an indulgence, even at the small cost of a double railway journey, in the carriages of the second class.

The next day—the day immediately following the Inquest—was left at my own disposal. I began the morning by again applying at the post-office for my regular report from Marian. It was waiting for me, as before, and it was written, throughout, in good spirits. I read the letter thankfully; and then set forth, with my mind at ease for the day, to walk to Old Welmingham, and to view the scene of the fire by the morning light.

Truly has the great poet said, "There is nothing serious in mortality." Through all the ways of our unintelligible world, the trivial and the terrible walk hand in hand together. The irony of circumstances holds no mortal catastrophe in respect. When I reached the church, the trampled condition of the burial-ground was the only serious trace left of the fire and the death. A rough hoarding of boards had been knocked up before the vestry doorway. Rude caricatures were scrawled on it already; and the village children were fighting and shouting for the possession of the best peep-hole to see through. On the spot where I had heard the cry for help from the burning room, on the spot where the panic-stricken servant had dropped on his knees, a fussy flock of poultry was now scrambling for the first choice of worms after the rain—and on the ground at my feet, where the door and its dreadful burden had been laid, a workman's dinner was waiting for him, tied up in a yellow basin, and his faithful cur in charge was yelping at me for coming near the food. The old clerk, looking idly at the slow commencement of the repairs, had only one interest that he could talk about, now—the interest of escaping all blame, for his own part, on account of the

accident that had happened. One of the village women, whose white, wild face I remembered, the picture of terror, when we pulled down the beam, was giggling with another woman, the picture of inanity, over an old washing-tub. Nothing serious in mortality! Solomon in all his glory, was Solomon with the elements of the contemptible lurking in every fold of his robes and in every corner of his palace.

As I left the place, my thoughts turned, not for the first time, to the complete overthrow that all present hope of establishing Laura's identity had now suffered through Sir Percival's death. If he had lived—well! if he had, would that total change of circumstances really have altered the result? Could I have made my discovery a marketable commodity, even for Laura's sake, after I had found out that robbery of the rights of others was the essence of Sir Percival's crime? Could I have offered the price of *my* silence for *his* confession of the conspiracy, when the effect of that silence must have been to keep the right heir from the estates, and the right owner from the name? Impossible! If Sir Percival had lived, the discovery, from which (in my ignorance of the true nature of the Secret) I had hoped so much, could not have been mine to suppress, or to make public, as I thought best, for the vindication of Laura's rights. In common honesty and common honour, I must have gone at once to the stranger whose birthright had been usurped—I must have renounced the victory at the moment when it was mine, by placing my discovery unreservedly in that stranger's hands—and I must have faced afresh all the difficulties which stood between me and the one object of my life, exactly as I was resolved, in my heart of hearts, to face them now!

I returned to Welmingham with my mind composed; feeling more sure of myself and my resolution than I had felt yet.

On my way to the hotel, I passed the end of the square in which Mrs. Catherick lived. Should I go back to the house, and make another attempt to see her? No.



That news of Sir Percival's death, which was the last news she ever expected to hear, must have reached her, hours since. All the proceedings at the Inquest had been reported in the local paper that morning: there was nothing I could tell her which she did not know already. My interest in making her speak had slackened. I remembered the furtive hatred in her face, when she said, "There is no news of Sir Percival that I don't expect—except the news of his death." I remembered the stealthy interest in her eyes when they settled on me at parting, after she had spoken those words. Some instinct, deep in my heart, which I felt to be a true one, made the prospect of again entering her presence repulsive to me—I turned away from the square, and went straight back to the hotel.

Some hours later, while I was resting in the coffee-room, a letter was placed in my hands by the waiter. It was addressed to me, by name; and I found, on inquiry, that it had been left at the bar by a woman, just as it was near dusk, and just before the gas was lighted. She had said nothing; and she had gone away again before there was time to speak to her, or even to notice who she was.

I opened the letter. It was neither dated, nor signed; and the handwriting was palpably disguised. Before I had read the first sentence, however, I knew who my correspondent was. Mrs. Catherick.

The letter ran as follows—I copy it exactly, word for word:

"Sir, you have not come back, as you said you would. No matter; I know the news, and I write to tell you so. Did you see anything particular in my face when you left me? I was wondering whether the day of his downfall had come at last, and whether you were the chosen instrument for working it. You were—and you *have* worked it. You were weak enough, as I have heard, to try and save his life. If you had succeeded, I should have looked upon you as my enemy. Now you have failed, I hold you as my friend. Your inquiries frightened him into the vestry by night;

your inquiries, without your privity, and against your will, have served the hatred and wreaked the vengeance of three-and-twenty years. Thank you, sir, in spite of yourself.

"I owe something to the man who has done this. How can I pay my debt? If I was a young woman still, I might say, 'Come! put your arm round my waist, and kiss me, if you like.' I should have been fond enough of you, even to go that length; and you would have accepted my invitation—you would, sir, twenty years ago! But I am an old woman, now. Well! I can satisfy your curiosity, and pay my debt in that way. You *had* a great curiosity to know certain private affairs of mine, when you came to see me—private affairs which all your sharpness could not look into without my help—private affairs which you have not discovered, even now. You *shall* discover them; your curiosity shall be satisfied. I will take any trouble to please you, my estimable young friend!

"You were a little boy, I suppose, in the year twenty-seven? I was a handsome young woman, at that time, living at Old Welmingham. I had a contemptible fool for a husband. I had also the honour of being acquainted (never mind how) with a certain gentleman (never mind whom). I shall not call him by his name. Why should I? It was not his own. He never had a name: you know that, by this time, as well as I do.

"It will be more to the purpose to tell you how he worked himself into my good graces. I was born with the tastes of a lady; and he gratified them. In other words, he admired me, and he made me presents. No woman can resist admiration and presents—especially presents, provided they happen to be just the things she wants. He was sharp enough to know that—most men are. Naturally, he wanted something, in return—all men do. And what do you think was the something? The merest trifle. Nothing but the key of the vestry, and the key of the press inside it, when my husband's back was turned. Of course he lied when I asked him why he wished me to get him the keys, in that



private way. He might have saved himself the trouble—I didn't believe him. But I liked my presents, and I wanted more. So I got him the keys, without my husband's knowledge. I watched him, without his own knowledge. Once, twice, four times, I watched him—and the fourth time I found him out.

"I was never over-scrupulous where other people's affairs were concerned; and I was not over-scrupulous about his adding one to the marriages in the register, on his own account. Of course, I knew it was wrong; but it did no harm to *me*—which was one good reason for not making a fuss about it. And I had not got a gold watch and chain—which was another, still better. And he had promised me one from London, only the day before—which was a third, best of all. If I had known what the law considered the crime to be, and how the law punished it, I should have taken proper care of myself, and have exposed him then and there. But I knew nothing—and I longed for the gold watch. All the conditions I insisted on were that he should tell me everything. I was as curious about his affairs then, as you are about mine now. He granted my conditions—why, you will see presently.

"This, put in short, is what I heard from him. He did not willingly tell me all that I tell you here. I drew some of it from him by persuasion, some of it by questions. I was determined to have all the truth—and I believe I got it.

"He knew no more than any one else of what the state of things really was between his father and mother, till after his mother's death. Then, his father confessed it, and promised to do what he could for his son. He died having done nothing—not having even made a will. The son (who can blame him?) wisely provided for himself. He came to England at once, and took possession of the property. There was no one to suspect him, and no one to say him nay. His father and mother had always lived as man and wife—none of the few people who were acquainted with them ever supposed them to be anything else. The right person to

claim the property (if the truth had been known) was a distant relation, who had no idea of ever getting it, and who was away at sea when his father died. He had no difficulty, so far—he took possession, as a matter of course. But he could not borrow money on the property as a matter of course. There were two things wanted of him, before he could do this. One was a certificate of his birth, and the other was a certificate of his parents' marriage. The certificate of his birth was easily got—he was born abroad, and the certificate was there in due form. The other matter was a difficulty—and that difficulty brought him to Old Welmingham.

"But for one consideration, he might have gone to Knowlesbury instead. His mother had been living there just before she met with his father—living under her maiden name; the truth being that she was really a married woman, married in Ireland, where her husband had ill-used her and had afterwards gone off with some other person. I give you this fact on good authority: Sir Felix mentioned it to his son, as the reason why he had not married. You may wonder why the son, knowing that his parents had met each other at Knowlesbury, did not play his first tricks with the register of that church, where it might have been fairly presumed his father and mother were married. The reason was, that the clergyman who did duty at Knowlesbury church, in the year eighteen hundred and three (when, according to his birth-certificate, his father and mother *ought* to have been married), was alive still, when he took possession of the property in the New Year of eighteen hundred and twenty-seven. This awkward circumstance forced him to extend his inquiries to our neighbourhood. There, no such danger existed: the former clergyman at our church having been dead for some years.

"Old Welmingham suited his purpose, as well as Knowlesbury. His father had removed his mother from Knowlesbury, and had lived with her at a cottage on the river, a little distance from our village. People who had known his



solitary ways when he was single, did not wonder at his solitary ways when he was married. If he had been anything but a hideous, crooked creature to look at, his retired life with the lady might have raised some suspicions; but, as things were, his hiding his ugliness and his deformity in the strictest privacy surprised nobody. He lived in our neighbourhood till he came in possession of the Park. After three or four and twenty years had passed, who was to say (the clergyman being dead) that his marriage had not been as private as the rest of his life, and that it had not taken place at Old Welmingham church?

“So, as I told you, the son found our neighbourhood the surest place he could choose, to set things right secretly in his own interests. It may surprise you to hear that what he really did to the marriage-register was done on the spur of the moment—done on second thoughts.

“His first notion was only to tear the leaf out (in the right year and month), to destroy it privately, to go back to London, and to tell the lawyers to get him the necessary certificate of his father’s marriage, innocently referring them of course to the date on the leaf that was gone. Nobody could say his father and mother had *not* been married, after that—and whether, under the circumstances, they would stretch a point or not, about lending him the money (he thought they would), he had his answer ready, at all events, if a question was ever raised about his right to the name and the estate.

“But when he came to look privately at the register for himself, he found at the bottom of one of the pages for the year eighteen hundred and three, a blank space left, seemingly through there being no room to make a long entry there, which was made instead at the top of the next page. The sight of this chance altered all his plans. It was an opportunity he had never hoped for, or thought of—and he took it, you know how. The blank space, to have exactly tallied with his birth-certificate, ought to have occurred in the

February part of the register. It occurred in the April part instead. However, in this case, if suspicious questions were asked, the answer was not hard to find. He had only to describe himself as a seven months’ child.

“I was fool enough, when he told me his story, to feel some interest and some pity for him—which was just what he calculated on, as you will see. I thought him hardly used. It was not his fault that his father and mother were not married; and it was not his father’s and mother’s fault, either. A more scrupulous woman than I was—a woman who had not set her heart on a gold watch and chain—would have found some excuses for him. At all events, I held my tongue, and helped to screen what he was about. He was some time getting the ink the right colour (mixing it over and over again in pots and bottles of mine), and some time, afterwards, in practising the handwriting. He succeeded in the end—and made an honest woman of his mother, after she was in her grave. So far, I don’t deny that he behaved honourably enough to me. He gave me my watch and chain; both were of superior workmanship, and very expensive. I have got them still—the watch goes beautifully.

“You said, the other day, that Mrs. Clements had told you everything she knew. In that case, there is no need for me to write about the trumpery scandal by which I was the sufferer—the innocent sufferer, I positively assert. You must know as well as I do what the notion was which my husband took into his head, when he found me and my fine-gentleman acquaintance meeting each other privately, and talking secrets together. But what you don’t know, is how it ended between that same gentleman and myself. You shall read, and see how he behaved to me.

“The first words I said to him, when I saw the turn things had taken, were, ‘Do me justice—clear my character of a stain on it which you know I don’t deserve. I don’t want you to make a clean breast of it to my husband—only tell him, on your



word of honour as a gentleman, that he is wrong, and that I am not to blame in the way he thinks I am. Do me that justice, at least, after all I have done for you.' He flatly refused, in so many words. He told me, plainly, that it was his interest to let my husband and all my neighbours believe the falsehood—because, as long as they did so, they were quite certain never to suspect the truth. I had a spirit of my own; and I told him they should know the truth from my lips. His reply was short, and to the point. If I spoke, I was a lost woman, as certainly as he was a lost man.

"Yes! it had come to that. He had deceived me about the risk I ran in helping him. He had practised on my ignorance; he had tempted me with his gifts; he had interested me with his story—and the result of it was that he had made me his accomplice. He owned this, coolly; and he ended by telling me, for the first time, what the frightful punishment really was for his offence, and for any one who helped him to commit it. In those days, the Law was not so tender-hearted as I hear it is now. Murderers were not the only people liable to be hanged; and women convicts were not treated like ladies in undeserved distress. I confess he frightened me—the mean impostor! the cowardly blackguard! Do you understand, now, how I hated him? Do you understand why I am taking all this trouble—thankfully taking it—to gratify the curiosity of the meritorious young gentleman who hunted him down?

"Well, to go on. He was hardly fool enough to drive me to downright desperation. I was not the sort of woman whom it was quite safe to hunt into a corner—he knew that, and wisely quieted me with proposals for the future. I deserved some reward (he was kind enough to say) for the service I had done him, and some compensation (he was so obliging as to add) for what I had suffered. He was quite willing—generous scoundrel!—to make me a handsome yearly allowance, payable quarterly, on two conditions. First, I was to hold my tongue—in my own interests as well as in

his. Secondly, I was not to stir away from Welmingham, without first letting him know, and waiting till I had obtained his permission. In my own neighbourhood, no virtuous female friends would tempt me into dangerous gossiping at the tea-table—in my own neighbourhood, he would always know where to find me. A hard condition, that second one—but I accepted it. What else was I to do? I was left helpless, with the prospect of a coming incumbrance in the shape of a child. What else was I to do? Cast myself on the mercy of my runaway idiot of a husband who had raised the scandal against me? I would have died first. Besides, the allowance *was* a handsome one. I had a better income, a better house over my head, better carpets on my floors, than half the women who turned up the whites of their eyes at the sight of me. The dress of Virtue, in our parts, was cotton print. I had silk.

"So, I accepted the conditions he offered me, and made the best of them, and fought my battle with my respectable neighbours on their own ground, and won it in course of time—as you saw yourself. How I kept his Secret (and mine) through all the years that have passed from that time to this; and whether my late daughter, Anne, ever really crept into my confidence, and got the keeping of the Secret too—are questions, I dare say, to which you are curious to find an answer. Well! my gratitude refuses you nothing. I will turn to a fresh page, and give you the answer, presently."

First published 21 July 1860
All The Year Round Vol.III No.65 pp.337-342

