

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

ALL THE YEAR ROUND.

A WEEKLY JOURNAL.

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THE WOMAN IN WHITE.

PART THE SECOND. HARTRIGHT'S NARRATIVE.

MRS. CATHERICK'S LETTER CONCLUDED.

“I MUST begin this fresh page, Mr. Hartright, by expressing my surprise at the interest which you appear to have felt in my late daughter—it is quite unaccountable to me. If that interest makes you anxious for any particulars of her early life, I must refer you to Mrs. Clements, who knows more of the subject than I do. Pray understand that I do not profess to have been at all over-fond of my late daughter. She was a worry and an incumbrance to me from first to last, with the additional disadvantage of being always weak in the head.

“There is no need to trouble you with many personal particulars relating to those past times. It will be enough to say that I observed the terms of the bargain on my side, and that I enjoyed my comfortable income, in return, paid quarterly. Now and then I got away, and changed the scene for a short time; always asking leave of my lord and master first, and generally getting it. He was not, as I have already told you, fool enough to drive me too hard; and he could reasonably rely on my holding my tongue, for my own sake, if not for his. One of my longest trips away from home was the trip I took to Limmeridge, to nurse a half-sister there, who was dying. She was reported to have saved money; and I thought it as well (in case any accident happened to stop my

allowance) to look after my own interests in that direction. As things turned out, however, my pains were all thrown away; and I got nothing, because nothing was to be had.

I had taken Anne to the north with me; having my whims and fancies, occasionally, about my child, and getting, at such times, jealous of Mrs. Clements's influence over her. I never liked Mrs. Clements. She was a poor, empty-headed, spiritless woman—what you call a born drudge—and I was, now and then, not averse to plaguing her by taking Anne away. Not knowing what else to do with my girl, while I was nursing in Cumberland, I put her to school at Limmeridge. The lady of the manor, Mrs. Fairlie (a remarkably plain-looking woman, who had entrapped one of the handsomest men in England into marrying her), amused me wonderfully, by taking a violent fancy to my girl. The consequence was, she learnt nothing at school, and was petted and spoilt at Limmeridge House. Among other whims and fancies which they taught her there, they put some nonsense into her head about always wearing white. Hating white and liking colours myself, I determined to take the nonsense out of her head as soon as we got home again.

“Strange to say, my daughter resolutely resisted me. When she *had* got a notion once fixed in her mind, she was, like other half-witted people, as obstinate as a mule in keeping it. We quarrelled finely; and Mrs. Clements, not liking to



see it, I suppose, offered to take Anne away to live in London with her. I should have said, Yes, if Mrs. Clements had not sided with my daughter about her dressing herself in white. But, being determined she should *not* dress herself in white, and disliking Mrs. Clements more than ever for taking part against me, I said No, and meant No, and stuck to No. The consequence was, my daughter remained with me; and the consequence of that, in its turn, was the first serious quarrel that happened about the Secret.

“The circumstance took place long after the time I have just been writing of. I had been settled for years in the new town; and was steadily living down my bad character, and slowly gaining ground among the respectable inhabitants. It helped me forward greatly towards this object, to have my daughter with me. Her harmlessness, and her fancy for dressing in white, excited a certain amount of sympathy. I left off opposing her favourite whim, on that account, because some of the sympathy was sure, in course of time, to fall to my share. Some of it did fall. I date my getting a choice of the two best sittings to let in the church, from that time; and I date the clergyman’s first bow from my getting the sittings.

“Well, being settled in this way, I received a letter one morning from that highly-born gentleman (now deceased), whom you and I know of, in answer to one of mine, warning him, according to agreement, of my wishing to leave the town, for a little change of air and scene. The ruffianly side of him must have been uppermost, I suppose, when he got my letter—for he wrote back, refusing me, in such abominably insolent language, that I lost all command over myself; and abused him, in my daughter’s presence, as ‘a low impostor, whom I could ruin for life, if I chose to open my lips and let out his secret.’ I said no more about him than that; being brought to my senses, as soon as those words had escaped me, by the sight of my daughter’s face, looking eagerly and curiously at mine. I instantly ordered her out of the room, until I had

composed myself again.

“My sensations were not pleasant, I can tell you, when I came to reflect on my own folly. Anne had been more than usually crazy and queer, that year; and when I thought of the chance there might be of her repeating my words in the town, and mentioning *his* name in connexion with them, if inquisitive people got hold of her, I was finely terrified at the possible consequences. My worst fears for myself, my worst dread of what he might do, led me no farther than this. I was quite unprepared for what really did happen, only the next day.

“On that next day, without any warning to me to expect him, he came to the house.

“His first words, and the tone in which he spoke them, surly as it was, showed me plainly enough that he had repented already of his insolent answer to my application, and that he had come (in a mighty bad temper) to try and set matters right again, before it was too late. Seeing my daughter in the room with me (I had been afraid to let her out of my sight, after what had happened the day before), he ordered her away. They neither of them liked each other; and he vented the ill-temper on *her*, which he was afraid to show to *me*.

“‘Leave us,’ he said, looking at her over his shoulder. She looked back over *her* shoulder, and waited, as if she didn’t care to go. ‘Do you hear?’ he roared out; ‘leave the room.’ ‘Speak to me civilly,’ says she, getting red in the face. ‘Turn the idiot out,’ says he, looking my way. She had always had crazy notions of her own about her dignity; and that word, ‘idiot,’ upset her in a moment. Before I could interfere, she stepped up to him, in a fine passion. ‘Beg my pardon, directly,’ says she, ‘or I’ll make it the worse for you. I’ll let out your Secret! I can ruin you for life, if I choose to open my lips.’ My own words!—repeated exactly from what I had said the day before—repeated, in his presence, as if they had come from herself. He sat speechless, as white as the paper I am writing on, while I pushed her out of the



room. When he recovered himself——

“No! I am too respectable a woman to mention what he said when he recovered himself. My pen is the pen of a member of the rector’s congregation, and a subscriber to the ‘Wednesday Lectures on Justification by Faith’—how can you expect me to employ it in writing bad language? Suppose, for yourself, the raging, swearing frenzy of the lowest ruffian in England; and let us get on together, as fast as may be, to the way in which it all ended.

“It ended, as you probably guess, by this time, in his insisting on securing his own safety by shutting her up. I tried to set things right. I told him that she had merely repeated, like a parrot, the words she had heard me say, and that she knew no particulars whatever, because I had mentioned none. I explained that she had affected, out of crazy spite against him, to know what she really did *not* know; that she only wanted to threaten him and aggravate him, for speaking to her as he had just spoken; and that my unlucky words gave her just the chance of doing mischief of which she was in search. I referred him to other queer ways of hers, and to his own experience of the vagaries of half-witted people—it was all to no purpose—he would not believe me on my oath—he was absolutely certain I had betrayed the whole Secret. In short, he would hear of nothing but shutting her up.

“Under these circumstances, I did my duty as a mother. ‘No pauper Asylum,’ I said; ‘I won’t have her put in a pauper Asylum. A Private Establishment, if *you* please. I have my feelings, as a mother, and my character to preserve in the town; and I will submit to nothing but a Private Establishment, of the sort which my genteel neighbours would choose for afflicted relatives of their own.’ Those were my words. It is gratifying to me to reflect that I did my duty. Though never over-fond of my late daughter, I had a proper pride about her. No pauper stain—thanks to my firmness and resolution—ever rested on MY child.

“Having carried my point (which I did the more easily, in consequence of the facilities offered by private Asylums), I could not refuse to admit that there were certain advantages gained by shutting her up. In the first place, she was taken excellent care of—being treated (as I took care to mention in the town) on the footing of a Lady. In the second place, she was kept away from Welmingham, where she might have set people suspecting and inquiring, by repeating my own incautious words.

“The only drawback of putting her under restraint, was a very slight one. We merely turned her empty boast about knowing the Secret, into a fixed delusion. Having first spoken in sheer crazy spitefulness against the man who had offended her, she was cunning enough to see that she had seriously frightened him, and sharp enough afterwards to discover that *he* was concerned in shutting her up. The consequence was she flamed out into a perfect frenzy of passion against him, going to the Asylum; and the first words she said to the nurses, after they had quieted her, were, that she was put in confinement for knowing his secret, and that she meant to open her lips and ruin him, when the right time came.

“She may have said the same thing to you, when you thoughtlessly assisted her escape. She certainly said it (as I heard last summer) to the unfortunate woman who married our sweet-tempered, nameless gentleman, lately deceased. If either you, or that unlucky lady, had questioned my daughter closely, and had insisted on her explaining what she really meant, you would have found her lose all her self-importance suddenly, and get vacant, and restless, and confused—you would have discovered that I am writing nothing here but the plain truth. She knew that there was a Secret—she knew who was connected with it—she knew who would suffer by its being known—and, beyond that, whatever airs of importance she may have given herself, whatever crazy boasting she may have indulged in with strangers, she never to her dying day,



knew more.

“Have I satisfied your curiosity? I have taken pains enough to satisfy it, at any rate. There is really nothing else I have to tell you about myself, or my daughter. My worst responsibilities, so far as she was concerned, were all over when she was secured in the Asylum. I had a form of letter relating to the circumstances under which she was shut up, given me to write, in answer to one Miss Halcombe, who was curious in the matter, and who must have heard plenty of lies about me from a certain tongue well accustomed to the telling of the same. And I did what I could afterwards to trace my runaway daughter, and prevent her from doing mischief, by making inquiries, myself, in the neighbourhood where she was falsely reported to have been seen. But these are trifles, of little or no interest to you after what you have heard already.

“So far, I have written in the friendliest possible spirit. But I cannot close this letter without adding a word here of serious remonstrance and reproof, addressed to yourself. In the course of your personal interview with me, you audaciously referred to my late daughter’s parentage, on the father’s side, as if that parentage was a matter of doubt. This was highly improper and very ungentlemanlike on your part! If we see each other again, remember, if you please, that I will allow no liberties to be taken with my reputation, and that the moral atmosphere of Welmingham (to use a favourite expression of my friend the rector’s) must not be tainted by loose conversation of any kind. If you allow yourself to doubt that my husband was Anne’s father, you personally insult me in the grossest manner. If you have felt, and if you still continue to feel, an unhallowed curiosity on this subject, I recommend you, in your own interests, to check it at once and for ever. On this side of the grave, Mr. Hartright, whatever may happen on the other, *that* curiosity will never be gratified.

“Perhaps, after what I have just said, you will see the necessity of writing

me an apology. Do so; and I will willingly receive it. I will, afterwards, if your wishes point to a second interview with me, go a step farther, and receive *you*. My circumstances only enable me to invite you to tea—not that they are at all altered for the worse by what has happened. I have always lived, as I think I told you, well within my income; and I have saved enough, in the last twenty years, to make me quite comfortable for the rest of my life. It is not my intention to leave Welmingham. There are one or two little advantages which I have still to gain in the town. The clergyman bows to me—as you saw. He is married; and his wife is not quite so civil. I propose to join the Dorcas Society; and I mean to make the clergyman’s wife bow to me next.

“If you favour me with your company, pray understand that the conversation must be entirely on general subjects. Any attempted reference to this letter will be quite useless—I am determined not to acknowledge having written it. The evidence has been destroyed in the fire, I know; but I think it desirable to err on the side of caution, nevertheless. On this account, no names are mentioned here, nor is any signature attached to these lines: the handwriting is disguised throughout, and I mean to deliver the letter myself, under circumstances which will prevent all fear of its being traced to my house. You can have no possible cause to complain of these precautions; seeing that they do not affect the information I here communicate, in consideration of the special indulgence which you have deserved at my hands. My hour for tea is half-past five, and my buttered toast waits for nobody.”

XI.

MY first impulse, after reading this extraordinary letter, was to destroy it. The hardened, shameless depravity of the whole composition, from beginning to end—the atrocious perversity of mind which persistently associated me with a calamity for which I was in no sense answerable, and with a death which I had



risked my own life in trying to avert—so disgusted me, that I was on the point of tearing the letter, when a consideration suggested itself, which warned me to wait a little before I destroyed it.

This consideration was entirely unconnected with Sir Percival. The information communicated to me, so far as it concerned him, did little more than confirm the conclusions at which I had already arrived. He had committed his offence as I had supposed him to have committed it; and the absence of all reference, on Mrs. Catherick's part, to the duplicate register at Knowlesbury, strengthened my previous conviction that the existence of the book, and the risk of detection which it implied, must have been necessarily unknown to Sir Percival. My interest in the question of the forgery was now at an end; and my only object in keeping the letter was to make it of some future service, in clearing up the last mystery that still remained to baffle me—the parentage of Anne Catherick, on the father's side. There were one or two sentences dropped in her mother's narrative, which it might be useful to refer to again, when matters of more immediate importance allowed me leisure to search for the missing evidence. I did not despair of still finding that evidence; and I had lost none of my anxiety to discover it, for I had lost none of my interest in tracing the father of the poor creature who now lay at rest in Mrs. Fairlie's grave.

Accordingly, I sealed up the letter, and put it away carefully in my pocket-book, to be referred to again when the time came.

The next day was my last in Hampshire. When I had appeared again before the magistrate at Knowlesbury, and when I had attended at the adjourned Inquest, I should be free to return to London by the afternoon or the evening train.

My first errand in the morning was, as usual, to the post-office. The letter from Marian was there; but I thought, when it was handed to me, that it felt unusually

light. I anxiously opened the envelope. There was nothing inside but a small strip of paper, folded in two. The few blotted, hurriedly-written lines which were traced on it contained these words:

“Come back as soon as you can. I have been obliged to move. Come to Gower's Walk, Fulham (number five). I will be on the look-out for you. Don't be alarmed about us; we are both safe and well. But come back.—Marian.”

The news which those lines contained—news which I instantly associated with some attempted treachery on the part of Count Fosco—fairly overwhelmed me. I stood breathless, with the paper crumpled up in my hand. What had happened? What subtle wickedness had the Count planned and executed in my absence? A night had passed since Marian's note was written—hours must elapse still, before I could get back to them—some new disaster might have happened already, of which I was ignorant. And here, miles and miles away from them, here I must remain—held, doubly held, at the disposal of the law!

I hardly know to what forgetfulness of my obligations anxiety and alarm might not have tempted me, but for the quieting influence of my faith in Marian. Nothing composed me, when I began to recover myself a little, but the remembrance of her energy, fidelity, and admirable quickness of resolution. My absolute reliance on her was the one earthly consideration which helped me to restrain myself, and gave me courage to wait. The Inquest was the first of the impediments in the way of my freedom of action. I attended it at the appointed time; the legal formalities requiring my presence in the room, but, as it turned out, not calling on me to repeat my evidence. This useless delay was a hard trial, although I did my best to quiet my impatience by following the course of the proceedings as closely as I could.

The London solicitor of the deceased (Mr. Merriman) was among the persons present. But he was quite unable to assist the objects of the inquiry. He could only



say that he was inexpressibly shocked and astonished, and that he could throw no light whatever on the mysterious circumstances of the case. At intervals during the adjourned investigation, he suggested questions which the Coroner put, but which led to no results. After a patient inquiry, which lasted nearly three hours, and which exhausted every available source of information, the jury pronounced the customary verdict in cases of sudden death by accident. They added to the formal decision a statement that there had been no evidence to show how the keys had been abstracted, how the fire had been caused, or what the purpose was for which the deceased had entered the vestry. This act closed the proceedings. The legal representative of the dead man was left to provide for the necessities of the interment; and the witnesses were free to retire.

Resolved not to lose a minute in getting to Knowlesbury, I paid my bill at the hotel, and hired a fly to take me to the town. A gentleman who heard me give the order, and who saw that I was going alone, informed me that he lived in the neighbourhood of Knowlesbury, and asked if I would have any objection to his getting home by sharing the fly with me. I accepted his proposal as a matter of course.

Our conversation during the drive was naturally occupied by the one absorbing subject of local interest. My new acquaintance had some knowledge of the late Sir Percival's solicitor; and he and Mr. Merriman had been discussing the state of the deceased gentleman's affairs and the succession to the property. Sir Percival's embarrassments were so well known all over the county that his solicitor could only make a virtue of necessity and plainly acknowledge them. He had died without leaving a will, and he had no personal property to bequeath, even if he had made one; the whole fortune which he had derived from his wife having been swallowed up by his creditors. The heir to the estate (Sir Percival having left no issue) was a son of Sir Felix Glyde's first

cousin—an officer in command of an East Indiaman. He would find his unexpected inheritance sadly encumbered; but the property would recover with time, and, if "the captain" was careful, he might find himself a rich man yet, before he died.

Absorbed as I was in the one idea of getting to London, this information (which events proved to be perfectly correct) had an interest of its own to attract my attention. I thought it justified me in keeping secret my discovery of Sir Percival's fraud. The heir whose rights he had usurped was the heir who would now have the estate. The income from it, for the last three-and-twenty years, which should properly have been his, and which the dead man had squandered to the last farthing, was gone beyond recal. If I spoke, my speaking would confer advantage on no one. If I kept the secret, my silence concealed the character of the man who had cheated Laura into marrying him. For her sake, I wished to conceal it—for her sake, still, I tell this story under feigned names.

I parted with my chance companion at Knowlesbury; and went at once to the town-hall. As I had anticipated, no one was present to prosecute the case against me—the necessary formalities were observed—and I was discharged. On leaving the court, a letter from Mr. Dawson was put into my hand. It informed me that he was absent on professional duty, and it reiterated the offer I had already received from him of any assistance which I might require at his hands. I wrote back, warmly acknowledging my obligations for his kindness, and apologising for not expressing my thanks personally, in consequence of my immediate recal, on pressing business, to town.

Half an hour later I was speeding back to London by the express train.

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