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opening extract from

The Woman in White

written by

Wilkie Collins

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THE FIRST EPOCH

The Story Begun by Sir Walter Hartright

(of Clement's Inn,[1] *Teacher of Drawing)*

I

IT WAS THE LAST DAY of July. The long hot summer was drawing to a close; and we, the weary pilgrims of the London pavement, were beginning to think of the cloud-shadows on the corn-fields, and the autumn breezes on the sea-shore.

For my own poor part, the fading summer left me out of health, out of spirits, and, if the truth must be told, out of money as well. During the past year I had not managed my professional resources as carefully as usual; and my extravagance now limited me to the prospect of spending the autumn economically between my mother's cottage at Hampstead and my own chambers in town.

The evening, I remember, was still and cloudy; the London air was at its heaviest; the distant hum of the street-traffic was at its faintest; the small pulse of the life within me, and the great heart of the city around me, seemed to be sinking in unison, languidly and more languidly, with the sinking sun. I roused myself from the book which I was dreaming over rather than reading, and left my chambers to meet the cool night air in the suburbs. It was one of the two evenings in every week which I was accustomed to spend with my mother and my sister. So I turned my steps northward in the direction of Hampstead.

Events which I have yet to relate make it necessary to mention in this place that my father had been dead some years at the period of which I am now writing; and that my sister Sarah and I were the sole survivors of a family of five children. My father was a drawing-master before me. His exertions had made him highly successful in his profession; and his affectionate anxiety to provide for the future of those who were dependent on his labours had impelled him, from the time of his marriage, to devote to the insuring of his life a much larger portion of his income than most men consider it necessary to set aside for that purpose. Thanks to his admirable prudence and self-denial my mother and sister were left, after his death, as independent of the world as they had been during his lifetime. I succeeded

to his connection, and had every reason to feel grateful for the prospect that awaited me at my starting in life.

The quiet twilight was still trembling on the topmost ridges of the heath; and the view of London below me had sunk into a black gulf in the shadow of the cloudy night, when I stood before the gate of my mother's cottage. I had hardly rung the bell before the house door was opened violently; my worthy Italian friend, Professor Pesca, appeared in the servant's place; and darted out joyously to receive me, with a shrill foreign parody on an English cheer.

On his own account, and, I must be allowed to add, on mine also, the Professor merits the honour of a formal introduction. Accident has made him the starting-point of the strange family story which it is the purpose of these pages to unfold.

I had first become acquainted with my Italian friend by meeting him at certain great houses where he taught his own language and I taught drawing. All I then knew of the history of his life was, that he had once held a situation in the University of Padua; that he had left Italy for political reasons (the nature of which he uniformly declined to mention to any one); and that he had been for many years respectably established in London as a teacher of languages.

Without being actually a dwarf – for he was perfectly well proportioned from head to foot – Pesca was, I think, the smallest human being I ever saw out of a show-room.[2] Remarkable anywhere, by his personal appearance, he was still further distinguished among the rank and file of mankind by the harmless eccentricity of his character. The ruling idea of his life appeared to be, that he was bound to show his gratitude to the country which had afforded him an asylum and a means of subsistence by doing his utmost to turn himself into an Englishman. Not content with paying the nation in general the compliment of invariably carrying an umbrella, and invariably wearing gaiters and a white hat, the Professor further aspired to become an Englishman in his habits and amusements, as well as in his personal appearance. Finding us distinguished, as a nation, by our love of athletic exercises, the little man, in the innocence of his heart, devoted himself impromptu to all our English sports and pastimes whenever he had the opportunity of joining them; firmly persuaded that he could adopt our national amusements of the field by an effort of will precisely as he had adopted our national gaiters and our national white hat.

I had seen him risk his limbs blindly at a fox-hunt and in a cricket-field; and soon afterwards I saw him risk his life, just as blindly, in the sea at Brighton.

We had met there accidentally, and were bathing together. If we had been engaged in any exercise peculiar to my own nation I should, of course,

have looked after Pesca carefully; but as foreigners are generally quite as well able to take care of themselves in the water as Englishmen, it never occurred to me that the art of swimming might merely add one more to the list of manly exercises which the Professor believed that he could learn impromptu. Soon after we had both struck out from shore, I stopped, finding my friend did not gain on me, and turned round to look for him. To my horror and amazement, I saw nothing between me and the beach but two little white arms which struggled for an instant above the surface of the water, and then disappeared from view. When I dived for him, the poor little man was lying quietly coiled up at the bottom, in a hollow of shingle, looking by many degrees smaller than I had ever seen him look before. During the few minutes that elapsed while I was taking him in, the air revived him, and he ascended the steps of the machine[3] with my assistance. With the partial recovery of his animation came the return of his wonderful delusion on the subject of swimming. As soon as his chattering teeth would let him speak, he smiled vacantly, and said he thought it must have been the Cramp.

When he had thoroughly recovered himself, and had joined me on the beach, his warm Southern nature broke through all artificial English restraints in a moment. He overwhelmed me with the wildest expressions of affection – exclaimed passionately, in his exaggerated Italian way, that he would hold his life henceforth at my disposal – and declared that he should never be happy again until he had found an opportunity of proving his gratitude by rendering me some service which I might remember, on my side, to the end of my days.

I did my best to stop the torrent of his tears and protestations by persisting in treating the whole adventure as a good subject for a joke; and succeeded at last, as I imagined, in lessening Pesca's overwhelming sense of obligation to me. Little did I think then – little did I think afterwards when our pleasant holiday had drawn to an end – that the opportunity of serving me for which my grateful companion so ardently longed was soon to come; that he was eagerly to seize it on the instant; and that by so doing he was to turn the whole current of my existence into a new channel, and to alter me to myself almost past recognition.

Yet so it was. If I had not dived for Professor Pesca when he lay under water on his shingle bed, I should in all human probability never have been connected with the story which these pages will relate – I should never, perhaps, have heard even the name of the woman who has lived in all my thoughts, who has possessed herself of all my energies, who has become the one guiding influence that now directs the purpose of my life.

II

PESCA'S FACE and manner, on the evening when we confronted each other at my mother's gate, were more than sufficient to inform me that something extraordinary had happened. It was quite useless, however, to ask him for an immediate explanation. I could only conjecture, while he was dragging me in by both hands, that (knowing my habits) he had come to the cottage to make sure of meeting me that night, and that he had some news to tell of an unusually agreeable kind.

We both bounced into the parlour in a highly abrupt and undignified manner. My mother sat by the open window laughing and fanning herself. Pesca was one of her especial favourites, and his wildest eccentricities were always pardonable in her eyes. Poor dear soul! from the first moment when she found out that the little Professor was deeply and gratefully attached to her son, she opened her heart to him unreservedly, and took all his puzzling foreign peculiarities for granted, without so much as attempting to understand any one of them.

My sister Sarah, with all the advantages of youth, was, strangely enough, less pliable. She did full justice to Pesca's excellent qualities of heart; but she could not accept him implicitly, as my mother accepted him for my sake. Her insular notions of propriety rose in perpetual revolt against Pesca's constitutional contempt for appearances; and she was always more or less undisguisedly astonished at her mother's familiarity with the eccentric little foreigner. I have observed, not only in my sister's case, but in the instances of others, that we of the young generation are nothing like so hearty and so impulsive as some of our elders. I constantly see old people flushed and excited by the prospect of some anticipated pleasure which altogether fails to ruffle the tranquillity of their serene grandchildren. Are we, I wonder, quite such genuine boys and girls now as our seniors were in their time? Has the great advance in education taken rather too long a stride; and are we, in these modern days, just the least trifle in the world too well brought up?

Without attempting to answer those questions decisively, I may at least record that I never saw my mother and my sister together in Pesca's society, without finding my mother much the younger woman of the two. On this occasion, for example, while the old lady was laughing heartily over the boyish manner in which we tumbled into the parlour, Sarah was perturbedly picking up the broken pieces of a teacup, which the Professor had knocked off the table in his precipitate advance to meet me at the door.

'I don't know what would have happened, Walter,' said my mother, 'if you had delayed much longer. Pesca has been half mad with impatience,

and I have been half mad with curiosity. The Professor has brought some wonderful news with him, in which he says you are concerned; and he has cruelly refused to give us the smallest hint of it till his friend Walter appeared.'

'Very provoking: it spoils the Set,' murmured Sarah to herself, mournfully absorbed over the ruins of the broken cup.

While these words were being spoken, Pesca, happily and fussily unconscious of the irreparable wrong which the crockery had suffered at his hands, was dragging a large armchair to the opposite end of the room, so as to command us all three, in the character of a public speaker addressing an audience. Having turned the chair with its back towards us, he jumped into it on his knees, and excitedly addressed his small congregation of three from an impromptu pulpit.

'Now, my good dears,' began Pesca (who always said 'good dears' when he meant 'worthy friends'), 'listen to me. The time has come – I recite my good news – I speak at last.'

'Hear, hear!' said my mother, humouring the joke.

'The next thing he will break, mamma,' whispered Sarah, 'will be the back of the best armchair.'

'I go back into my life, and I address myself to the noblest of created beings,' continued Pesca, vehemently apostrophising my unworthy self over the top rail of the chair. 'Who found me dead at the bottom of the sea (through Cramp); and who pulled me up to the top; and what did I say when I got into my own life and my own clothes again?'

'Much more than was at all necessary,' I answered as doggedly as possible; for the least encouragement in connection with this subject invariably let loose the Professor's emotions in a flood of tears.

'I said,' persisted Pesca, 'that my life belonged to my dear friend, Walter, for the rest of my days – and so it does. I said that I should never be happy again till I had found the opportunity of doing a good Something for Walter – and I have never been contented with myself till this most blessed day. Now,' cried the enthusiastic little man at the top of his voice, 'the overflowing happiness bursts out of me at every pore of my skin, like a perspiration; for on my faith, and soul, and honour, the something is done at last, and the only word to say now is – Right-all-right!'

It may be necessary to explain here that Pesca prided himself on being a perfect Englishman in his language, as well as in his dress, manners, and amusements. Having picked up a few of our most familiar colloquial expressions, he scattered them about over his conversation whenever they happened to occur to him, turning them, in his high relish for their sound and his general ignorance of their sense, into compound words and repetitions of his own, and always running them into each other, as if they

consisted of one long syllable.

'Among the fine London Houses where I teach the language of my native country,' said the Professor, rushing into his long-deferred explanation without another word of preface, 'there is one, mighty fine, in the big place called Portland. You all know where that is? Yes, yes – course-of-course. The fine house, my good dears, has got inside it a fine family. A Mamma, fair and fat; three young Misses, fair and fat; two young Misters, fair and fat; and a Papa, the fairest and the fattest of all, who is a mighty merchant, up to his eyes in gold – a fine man once, but seeing that he has got a naked head and two chins, fine no longer at the present time. Now mind! I teach the sublime Dante to the young Misses, and ah! – my-soul-bless-my-soul! – it is not in human language to say how the sublime Dante puzzled the pretty heads of all three! No matter – all in good time – and the more lessons the better for me. Now mind! Imagine to yourselves that I am teaching the young Misses today, as usual. We are all four of us down together in the Hell of Dante. At the Seventh Circle[4] – but no matter for that: all the Circles are alike to the three young Misses, fair and fat, – at the Seventh Circle, nevertheless, my pupils are sticking fast; and I, to set them going again, recite, explain, and blow myself up red-hot with useless enthusiasm, when – a creak of boots in the passage outside, and in comes the golden Papa, the mighty merchant with the naked head and the two chins. – Ha! my good dears, I am closer than you think for to the business, now. Have you been patient so far? or have you said to yourselves, "Deuce-what-the deuce! Pesca is long-winded tonight?" '

We declared that we were deeply interested. The Professor went on:

'In his hand, the golden Papa has a letter; and after he has made his excuse for disturbing us in our Infernal Region with the common mortal Business of the house, he addresses himself to the three young Misses, and begins, as you English begin everything in this blessed world that you have to say, with a great O. "O, my dears," says the mighty merchant, "I have got here a letter from my friend, Mr—" (the name has slipped out of my mind; but no matter; we shall come back to that; yes, yes right-all-right). So the Papa says, "I have got a letter from my friend, the Mister; and he wants a recommend from me, of a drawing-master, to go down to his house in the country." My soul-bless-my-soul! when I heard the golden Papa say those words, if I had been big enough to reach up to him, I should have put my arms round his neck, and pressed him to my bosom in a long and grateful hug! As it was, I only bounced upon my chair. My seat was on thorns, and my soul was on fire to speak; but I held my tongue, and let Papa go on. "Perhaps you know," says this good man of money, twiddling his friend's letter this way and that, in his golden fingers and thumbs, "perhaps you know, my dears, of a drawing-master that I can recommend?" The three young Misses all look at

each other, and then say (with the indispensable great O to begin) "O, dear no, Papa! But here is Mr Pesca – " At the mention of myself I can hold no longer – the thought of you, my good dears, mounts like blood to my head – I start from my seat, as if a spike had grown up from the ground through the bottom of my chair – I address myself to the mighty merchant, and I say (English phrase), "Dear sir, I have the man! The first and foremost drawing-master of the world! Recommend him by the post tonight, and send him off, bag and baggage (English phrase again – ha!), send him off, bag and baggage, by the train tomorrow!" "Stop, stop," says Papa; "is he a foreigner, or an Englishman?" "English to the bone of his back," I answer. "Respectable?" says Papa. "Sir," I say (for this last question of his outrages me, and I have done being familiar with him) – "Sir! the immortal fire of genius burns in this Englishman's bosom, and, what is more, his father had it before him!" "Never mind," says the golden barbarian of a Papa, "never mind about his genius, Mr Pesca. We don't want genius in this country, unless it is accompanied by respectability – and then we are very glad to have it, very glad indeed. Can your friend produce testimonials – letters that speak to his character?" I wave my hand negligently. "Letters?" I say. "Ha! my-soul-bless-my-soul! I should think so, indeed! Volumes of letters and portfolios of testimonials, if you like!" "One or two will do," says this man of phlegm and money. "Let him send them to me, with his name and address. And – stop, stop, Mr Pesca – before you go to your friend, you had better take a note." "Bank-note!" I say, indignantly. "No bank-note, if you please, till my brave Englishman has earned it first." "Bank-note!" says Papa, in a great surprise, "who talked of bank-note? I mean a note of the terms – a memorandum of what he is expected to do. Go on with your lesson, Mr Pesca, and I will give you the necessary extract from my friend's letter." Down sits the man of merchandise and money to his pen, ink, and paper; and down I go once again into the Hell of Dante, with my three young Misses after me. In ten minutes' time the note is written, and the boots of Papa are creaking themselves away in the passage outside. From that moment, on my faith, and soul, and honour, I know nothing more! The glorious thought that I have caught my opportunity at last, and that my grateful service for my dearest friend in the world is as good as done already, flies up into my head and makes me drunk. How I pull my young Misses and myself out of our Infernal Region again, how my other business is done afterwards, how my little bit of dinner slides itself down my throat, I know no more than a man in the moon. Enough for me, that here I am, with the mighty merchant's note in my hand, as large as life, as hot as fire, and as happy as a king! Ha! ha! ha! right-right-right-all-right!' Here the Professor waved the memorandum of terms over his head, and ended his long and voluble narrative with his shrill Italian parody on an English cheer.

My mother rose the moment he had done, with flushed cheeks and brightened eyes. She caught the little man warmly by both hands.

'My dear, good Pesca,' she said, 'I never doubted your true affection for Walter – but I am more than ever persuaded of it now!'

'I am sure we are very much obliged to Professor Pesca, for Walter's sake,' added Sarah. She half rose, while she spoke, as if to approach the armchair, in her turn; but, observing that Pesca was rapturously kissing my mother's hands, looked serious, and resumed her seat. 'If the familiar little man treats my mother in that way, how will he treat *me*?' Faces sometimes tell truth; and that was unquestionably the thought in Sarah's mind, as she sat down again.

Although I myself was gratefully sensible of the kindness of Pesca's motives, my spirits were hardly so much elevated as they ought to have been by the prospect of future employment now placed before me. When the Professor had quite done with my mother's hand, and when I had warmly thanked him for his interference on my behalf, I asked to be allowed to look at the note of terms which his respectable patron had drawn up for my inspection.

Pesca handed me the paper, with a triumphant flourish of the hand.

'Read!' said the little man majestically. 'I promise you, my friend, the writing of the golden Papa speaks with a tongue of trumpets for itself.'

The note of terms was plain, straightforward, and comprehensive, at any rate. It informed me,

First, That Frederick Fairlie, Esquire, of Limmeridge House, Cumberland, wanted to engage the services of a thoroughly competent drawing-master, for a period of four months certain.

Secondly, That the duties which the master was expected to perform would be of a twofold kind. He was to superintend the instruction of two young ladies in the art of painting in watercolours; and he was to devote his leisure time, afterwards, to the business of repairing and mounting a valuable collection of drawings, which had been suffered to fall into a condition of total neglect.

Thirdly, That the terms offered to the person who should undertake and properly perform these duties were four guineas a week; that he was to reside at Limmeridge House; and that he was to be treated there on the footing of a gentleman.

Fourthly, and lastly, That no person need think of applying for this situation unless he could furnish the most unexceptionable references to character and abilities. The references were to be sent to Mr Fairlie's friend in London, who was empowered to conclude all necessary arrangements. These instructions were followed by the name and address of Pesca's employer in Portland Place – and there the note, or memorandum, ended.

The prospect which this offer of an engagement held out was certainly an attractive one. The employment was likely to be both easy and agreeable; it was proposed to me at the autumn time of the year when I was least occupied; and the terms, judging by my personal experience in my profession, were surprisingly liberal. I knew this; I knew that I ought to consider myself very fortunate if I succeeded in securing the offered employment – and yet, no sooner had I read the memorandum than I felt an inexplicable unwillingness within me to stir in the matter. I had never in the whole of my previous experience found my duty and my inclination so painfully and so unaccountably at variance as I found them now.

'Oh, Walter, your father never had such a chance as this!' said my mother, when she had read the note of terms and had handed it back to me.

'Such distinguished people to know,' remarked Sarah, straightening herself in the chair; 'and on such gratifying terms of equality too! '

'Yes, yes; the terms, in every sense, are tempting enough!' I replied impatiently. 'But before I send in my testimonials, I should like a little time to consider – '

'Consider!' exclaimed my mother. 'Why, Walter, what is the matter with you?'

'Consider!' echoed my sister. 'What a very extraordinary thing to say, under the circumstances!'

'Consider!' chimed in the Professor. 'What is there to consider about? Answer me this! Have you not been complaining of your health, and have you not been longing for what you call a smack of the country breeze? Well! there in your hand is the paper that offers you perpetual choking mouthfuls of country breeze for four months' time. Is it not so? Ha! Again – you want money. Well! Is four golden guineas a week nothing? My-soul-bless-my-soul! only give it to *me* – and my boots shall creak like the golden Papa's, with a sense of the overpowering richness of the man who walks in them! Four guineas a week, and, more than that, the charming society of two young misses! and, more than that, your bed, your breakfast, your dinner, your gorging English teas and lunches and drinks of foaming beer, all for nothing – why, Walter, my dear good friend – deuce-what-the-deuce! – for the first time in my life I have not eyes enough in my head to look, and wonder at you!'

Neither my mother's evident astonishment at my behaviour, nor Pesca's fervid enumeration of the advantages offered to me by the new employment, had any effect in shaking my unreasonable disinclination to go to Limmeridge House. After starting all the petty objections that I could think of to going to Cumberland, and after hearing them answered, one after another, to my own complete discomfiture, I tried to set up a last obstacle by asking what was to become of my pupils in London while I was teaching

Mr Fairlie's young ladies to sketch from nature. The obvious answer to this was, that the greater part of them would be away on their autumn travels, and that the few who remained at home might be confided to the care of one of my brother drawing-masters, whose pupils I had once taken off his hands under similar circumstances. My sister reminded me that this gentleman had expressly placed his services at my disposal, during the present season, in case I wished to leave town; my mother seriously appealed to me not to let an idle caprice stand in the way of my own interests and my own health; and Pesca piteously entreated that I would not wound him to the heart by rejecting the first grateful offer of service that he had been able to make to the friend who had saved his life.

The evident sincerity and affection which inspired these remonstrances would have influenced any man with an atom of good feeling in his composition. Though I could not conquer my own unaccountable perversity, I had at least virtue enough to be heartily ashamed of it, and to end the discussion pleasantly by giving way, and promising to do all that was wanted of me.

The rest of the evening passed merrily enough in humorous anticipations of my coming life with the two young ladies in Cumberland. Pesca, inspired by our national grog, which appeared to get into his head, in the most marvellous manner, five minutes after it had gone down his throat, asserted his claims to be considered a complete Englishman by making a series of speeches in rapid succession, proposing my mother's health, my sister's health, my health, and the healths, in mass, of Mr Fairlie and the two young Misses, pathetically returning thanks himself, immediately afterwards, for the whole party. 'A secret, Walter,' said my little friend confidentially, as we walked home together. 'I am flushed by the recollection of my own eloquence. My soul bursts itself with ambition. One of these days I go into your noble Parliament. It is the dream of my whole life to be Honourable Pesca, M.P.!'

The next morning I sent my testimonials to the Professor's employer in Portland Place. Three days passed, and I concluded, with secret satisfaction, that my papers had not been found sufficiently explicit. On the fourth day, however, an answer came. It announced that Mr Fairlie accepted my services, and requested me to start for Cumberland immediately. All the necessary instructions for my journey were carefully and clearly added in a postscript.

I made my arrangements, unwillingly enough, for leaving London early the next day. Towards evening Pesca looked in, on his way to a dinner-party, to bid me good-bye.

'I shall dry my tears in your absence,' said the Professor gaily, 'with this glorious thought. It is my auspicious hand that has given the first push to

your fortune in the world. Go, my friend! When your sun shines in Cumberland (English proverb), in the name of heaven make your hay. Marry one of the two young Misses; become Honourable Hartright, M.P.; and when you are on the top of the ladder remember that Pesca, at the bottom, has done it all!'

I tried to laugh with my little friend over his parting jest, but my spirits were not to be commanded. Something jarred in me almost painfully while he was speaking his light farewell words.

When I was left alone again nothing remained to be done but to walk to the Hampstead cottage and bid my mother and Sarah good-bye.

III

THE HEAT had been painfully oppressive all day, and it was now a close and sultry night.

My mother and sister had spoken so many last words, and had begged me to wait another five minutes so many times, that it was nearly midnight when the servant locked the garden-gate behind me. I walked forward a few paces on the shortest way back to London, then stopped and hesitated.

The moon was full and broad in the dark blue starless sky, and the broken ground of the heath looked wild enough in the mysterious light to be hundreds of miles away from the great city that lay beneath it. The idea of descending any sooner than I could help into the heat and gloom of London repelled me. The prospect of going to bed in my airless chambers, and the prospect of gradual suffocation, seemed, in my present restless frame of mind and body, to be one and the same thing. I determined to stroll home in the purer air by the most roundabout way I could take; to follow the white winding paths across the lonely heath; and to approach London through its most open suburb by striking into the Finchley Road, and so getting back, in the cool of the new morning, by the western side of the Regent's Park.

I wound my way down slowly over the heath, enjoying the divine stillness of the scene, and admiring the soft alternations of light and shade as they followed each other over the broken ground on every side of me. So long as I was proceeding through this first and prettiest part of my night walk my mind remained passively open to the impressions produced by the view; and I thought but little on any subject – indeed, so far as my own sensations were concerned, I can hardly say that I thought at all.

But when I had left the heath and had turned into the by-road, where there was less to see, the ideas naturally engendered by the approaching change in my habits and occupations gradually drew more and more of my

attention exclusively to themselves. By the time I had arrived at the end of the road I had become completely absorbed in my own fanciful visions of Limmeridge House, of Mr Fairlie, and of the two ladies whose practice in the art of water-colour painting I was so soon to superintend.

I had now arrived at that particular point of my walk where four roads met – the road to Hampstead, along which I had returned, the road to Finchley, the road to West End, and the road back to London. I had mechanically turned in this latter direction, and was strolling along the lonely high-road – idly wondering, I remember, what the Cumberland young ladies would look like – when, in one moment, every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand laid lightly and suddenly on my shoulder from behind me.

I turned on the instant, with my fingers tightening round the handle of my stick.

There, in the middle of the broad, bright high-road – there, as if it had that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from the heaven – stood the figure of a solitary Woman, dressed from head to foot in white garments, her face bent in grave inquiry on mine, her hand pointing to the dark cloud over London, as I faced her.

I was far too seriously startled by the suddenness with which this extraordinary apparition stood before me, in the dead of night and in that lonely place, to ask what she wanted. The strange woman spoke first.

'Is that the road to London?' she said.

I looked attentively at her; as she put that singular question to me. It was then nearly one o'clock. All I could discern distinctly by the moonlight was a colourless, youthful face, meagre and sharp to look at about the cheeks and chin; large, grave, wistfully attentive eyes; nervous, uncertain lips; and light hair of a pale, brownish-yellow hue. There was nothing wild, nothing immodest in her manner: it was quiet and self-controlled, a little melancholy and a little touched by suspicion; not exactly the manner of a lady, and, at the same time, not the manner of a woman in the humblest rank of life. The voice, little as I had yet heard of it, had something curiously still and mechanical in its tones, and the utterance was remarkably rapid. She held a small bag in her hand- and her dress – bonnet, shawl, and gown all of white – was, so far as I could guess, certainly not composed of very delicate or very expensive materials. Her figure was slight, and rather above the average height – her gait and actions free from the slightest approach to extravagance. This was all that I could observe of her in the dim light and under the perplexingly strange circumstances of our meeting. What sort of a woman she was, and how she came to be out alone in the high-road, an hour after midnight, I altogether failed to guess. The one thing of which I felt certain was, that the grossest of mankind could not have misconstrued

her motive in speaking, even at that suspiciously late hour and in that suspiciously lonely place.

'Did you hear me?' she said, still quietly and rapidly, and without the least fretfulness or impatience. 'I asked if that was the way to London.'

'Yes,' I replied, 'that is the way: it leads to St John's Wood and the Regent's Park. You must excuse my not answering you before. I was rather startled by your sudden appearance in the road; and I am, even now, quite unable to account for it.'

'You don't suspect me of doing anything wrong, do you? I have done nothing wrong. I have met with an accident – I am very unfortunate in being here alone so late. Why do you suspect me of doing wrong?'

She spoke with unnecessary earnestness and agitation, and shrank back from me several places. I did my best to reassure her.

'Pray don't suppose that I have any idea of suspecting you,' I said, 'or any other wish than to be of assistance to you, if I can. I only wondered at your appearance in the road, because it seemed to me to be empty the instant before I saw you.'

She turned, and pointed back to a place at the junction of the road to London and the road to Hampstead, where there was a gap in the hedge.

'I heard you coming,' she said, 'and hid there to see what sort of man you were, before I risked speaking. I doubted and feared about it till you passed; and then I was obliged to steal after you, and touch you.'

Steal after me and touch me? Why not call to me? Strange, to say the least of it.

'May I trust you?' she asked. 'You don't think the worse of me because I have met with an accident?' She stopped in confusion; shifted her bag from one hand to the other; and sighed bitterly.

The loneliness and helplessness of the woman touched me. The natural impulse to assist her and to spare her got the better of the judgment, the caution, the worldly tact, which an older, wiser, and colder man might have summoned to help him in this strange emergency.

'You may trust me for any harmless purposes,' I said. 'If it troubles you to explain your strange situation to me, don't think of returning to the subject again. I have no right to ask you for any explanations. Tell me how I can help you; and if I can, I will.'

'You are very kind, and I am very, very thankful to have met you.' The first touch of womanly tenderness that I had heard from her trembled in her voice as she said the words: but no tears glistened in those large, wistfully attentive eyes of hers, which were still fixed on me. 'I have only been in London once before,' she went on, more and more rapidly 'and I know nothing about that side of it, yonder. Can I get a fly,[5] or a carriage of any kind? Is it too late? I don't know. If you could show me where to get a

fly – and if you will only promise not to interfere with me, and to let me leave you, when and how I please – I have a friend in London who will be glad to receive me – I want nothing else – will you promise?'

She looked anxiously up and down the road; shifted her bag again from one hand to the other; repeated the words, 'Will you promise?' and looked hard in my face, with a pleading fear and confusion that it troubled me to see.

What could I do? Here was a stranger utterly and helplessly at my mercy – and that stranger a forlorn woman. No house was near; no one was passing whom I could consult; and no earthly right existed on my part to give me a power of control over her, even if I had known how to exercise it. I trace these lines, self-distrustfully, with the shadows of after-events darkening the very paper I write on; and still I say, what could I do?

What I did do, was to try and gain time by questioning her.

'Are you sure that your friend in London will receive you at such a late hour as this?' I said.

'Quite sure. Only say you will let me leave you when and how I please – only say you won't interfere with me. Will you promise?'

As she repeated the words for the third time, she came close to me and laid her hand, with a sudden gentle stealthiness, on my bosom – a thin hand; a cold hand (when I removed it with mine) even on that sultry night. Remember that I was young; remember that the hand which touched me was a woman's.

'Will you promise?'

'Yes.'

One word! The little familiar word that is on everybody's lips, every hour in the day. Oh me! and I tremble, now, when I write it.

We set our faces towards London, and walked on together in the first still hour of the new day – I, and this woman, whose name, whose character, whose story, whose objects in life, whose very presence by my side, at that moment, were fathomless mysteries to me. It was like a dream. Was I Walter Hartright? Was this the well-known, uneventful road, where holiday people strolled on Sundays? Had I really left, little more than an hour since, the quiet, decent, conventionally domestic atmosphere of my mother's cottage? I was too bewildered – too conscious also of a vague sense of something like self-reproach – to speak to my strange companion for some minutes. It was her voice again that first broke the silence between us.

'I want to ask you something,' she said suddenly. 'Do you know many people in London?'

'Yes, a great many.'

'Many men of rank and title?' There was an unmistakable tone of suspicion in the strange question. I hesitated about answering it.

'Some,' I said, after a moment's silence.

'Many' – she came to a full stop, and looked me searchingly in the face – 'many men of the rank of Baronet?'

Too much astonished to reply, I questioned her in my turn.

'Why do you ask? '

'Because I hope, for my own sake, there is one Baronet that you don't know.'

'Will you tell me his name?'

'I can't – I daren't – I forget myself when I mention it.' She spoke loudly and almost fiercely, raised her clenched hand in the air, and shook it passionately; then, on a sudden, controlled herself again, and added, in tones lowered to a whisper, 'Tell me which of them *you* know.'

I could hardly refuse to humour her in such a trifle, and I mentioned three names. Two, the names of fathers of families whose daughters I taught; one, the name of a bachelor who had once taken me a cruise in his yacht, to make sketches for him.

'Ah! you *don't* know him,' she said, with a sigh of relief. 'Are you a man of rank and title yourself?'

'Far from it. I am only a drawing-master.'

As the reply passed my lips – a little bitterly, perhaps – she took my arm with the abruptness which characterised all her actions.

'Not a man of rank and title,' she repeated to herself. 'Thank God! I may trust *him*.'

I had hitherto contrived to master my curiosity out of consideration for my companion; but it got the better of me now.

'I am afraid you have serious reason to complain of some man of rank and title?' I said. 'I am afraid the baronet, whose name you are unwilling to mention to me, has done you some grievous wrong? Is he the cause of your being out here at this strange time of night?'

'Don't ask me: don't make me talk of it,' she answered. 'I'm not fit now. I have been cruelly used and cruelly wronged. You will be kinder than ever, if you will walk on fast, and not speak to me. I sadly want to quiet myself, if I can.'

We moved forward again at a quick pace; and for half an hour, at least, not a word passed on either side. From time to time, being forbidden to make any more inquiries, I stole a look at her face. It was always the same; the lips close shut, the brow frowning, the eyes looking straight forward, eagerly and yet absently. We had reached the first houses, and were close on the new Wesleyan college, before her set features relaxed, and she spoke once more.

'Do you live in London?' she said.

'Yes.' As I answered, it struck me that she might have formed some intention of appealing to me for assistance or advice, and that I ought to spare her a possible disappointment by warning her of my approaching

absence from home. So I added, 'But tomorrow I shall be away from London for some time. I am going into the country.'

'Where?' she asked. 'North or south?'

'North – to Cumberland.'

'Cumberland!' she repeated the word tenderly. 'Ah! I wish I was going there too. I was once happy in Cumberland.'

I tried again to lift the veil that hung between this woman and me.

'Perhaps you were born,' I said, 'in the beautiful Lake country.'

'No,' she answered. 'I was born in Hampshire; but I once went to school for a little while in Cumberland. Lakes? I don't remember any lakes. It's Limmeridge village, and Limmeridge House, I should like to see again.'

It was my turn now to stop suddenly. In the excited state of my curiosity, at that moment, the chance reference to Mr Fairlie's place of residence, on the lips of my strange companion, staggered me with astonishment.

'Did you hear anybody calling after us?' she asked, looking up and down the road affrightedly, the instant I stopped.

'No, no. I was only struck by the name of Limmeridge House. I heard it mentioned by some Cumberland people a few days since.'

'Ah! not *my* people. Mrs Fairlie is dead; and her husband is dead; and their little girl may be married and gone away by this time. I can't say who lives at Limmeridge now. If any more are left there of that name, I only know I love them for Mrs Fairlie's sake.'

She seemed about to say more; but while she was speaking, we came within view of the turnpike, at the top of the Avenue Road. Her hand tightened round my arm, and she looked anxiously at the gate before us.

'Is the turnpike man looking out?' she asked.

He was not looking out; no one else was near the place when we passed through the gate. The sight of the gas-lamps and houses seemed to agitate her, and to make her impatient.

'This is London,' she said. 'Do you see any carriage I can get? I am tired and frightened. I want to shut myself in and be driven away.'

I explained to her that we must walk a little further to get to a cab-stand, unless we were fortunate enough to meet with an empty vehicle; and then tried to resume the subject of Cumberland. It was useless. That idea of shutting herself in, and being driven away, had now got full possession of her mind. She could think and talk of nothing else.

We had hardly proceeded a third of the way down the Avenue Road when I saw a cab draw up at a house a few doors below us, on the opposite side of the way. A gentleman got out and let himself in at the garden door. I hailed the cab, as the driver mounted the box again. When we crossed the road, my companion's impatience increased to such an extent that she almost forced me to run.

'It's so late,' she said. 'I am only in a hurry because it's so late.'

'I can't take you, sir, if you're not going towards Tottenham Court Road,' said the driver civilly, when I opened the cab door. 'My horse is dead beat, and I can't get him no further than the stable.'

'Yes, yes. That will do for me. I'm going that way – I'm going that way.' She spoke with breathless eagerness, and pressed by me into the cab.

I had assured myself that the man was sober as well as civil before I let her enter the vehicle. And now, when she was seated inside, I entreated her to let me see her set down safely at her destination.

'No, no, no,' she said vehemently. 'I'm quite safe, and quite happy now. If you are a gentleman, remember your promise. Let him drive on till I stop him. Thank you – oh! thank you, thank you!'

My hand was on the cab door. She caught it in hers, kissed it, and pushed it away. The cab drove off at the same moment – I started into the road, with some vague idea of stopping it again, I hardly knew why – hesitated from dread of frightening and distressing her – called, at last, but not loudly enough to attract the driver's attention. The sound of the wheels grew fainter in the distance – the cab melted into the black shadows on the road – the woman in white was gone.

Ten minutes or more had passed. I was still on the same side of the way; now mechanically walking forward a few paces; now stopping again absently. At one moment I found myself doubting the reality of my own adventure; at another I was perplexed and distressed by an uneasy sense of having done wrong, which yet left me confusedly ignorant of how I could have done right. I hardly knew where I was going, or what I meant to do next; I was conscious of nothing but the confusion of my own thoughts, when I was abruptly recalled to myself – awakened, I might almost say – by the sound of rapidly approaching wheels close behind me.

I was on the dark side of the road, in the thick shadow of some garden trees, when I stopped to look round. On the opposite and lighter side of the way, a short distance below me, a policeman was strolling along in the direction of the Regent's Park.

The carriage passed me – an open chaise[6] driven by two men.

'Stop!' cried one. 'There's a policeman. Let's ask him.'

The horse was instantly pulled up, a few yards beyond the dark place where I stood.

'Policeman!' cried the first speaker. 'Have you seen a woman pass this way?'

'What sort of woman, sir?'

'A woman in a lavender-coloured gown – '

'No, no,' interposed the second man. 'The clothes we gave her were

found on her bed. She must have gone away in the clothes she wore when she came to us. In white, policeman. A woman in white.'

'I haven't seen her, sir.'

'If you or any of your men meet with the woman, stop her, and send her in careful keeping to that address. I'll pay all expenses, and a fair reward into the bargain.'

The policeman looked at the card that was banded down to him.

'Why are we to stop her, sir? What has she done?'

'Done! She has escaped from my Asylum. Don't forget; a woman in white. Drive on.'

IV

'SHE HAS ESCAPED from my Asylum!'

I cannot say with truth that the terrible inference which those words suggested flashed upon me like a new revelation. Some of the strange questions put to me by the woman in white, after my ill-considered promise to leave her free to act as she pleased, had suggested the conclusion either that she was naturally flighty and unsettled, or that some recent shock of terror had disturbed the balance of her faculties. But the idea of absolute insanity which we all associate with the very name of an Asylum, had, I can honestly declare, never occurred to me, in connection with her. I had seen nothing, in her language or her actions, to justify it at the time; and even with the new light thrown on her by the words which the stranger had addressed to the policeman, I could see nothing to justify it now.

What had I done? Assisted the victim of the most horrible of all false imprisonments[7] to escape; or cast loose on the wide world of London an unfortunate creature, whose actions it was my duty, and every man's duty, mercifully to control? I turned sick at heart when the question occurred to me, and when I felt self-reproachfully that it was asked too late.

In the disturbed state of my mind, it was useless to think of going to bed, when I at last got back to my chambers in Clement's Inn. Before many hours elapsed it would be necessary to start on my journey to Cumberland. I sat down and tried, first to sketch, then to read – but the woman in white got between me and my pencil, between me and my book. Had the forlorn creature come to any harm? That was my first thought, though I shrank selfishly from confronting it. Other thoughts followed, on which it was less harrowing to dwell. Where had she stopped the cab? What had become of her now? Had she been traced and captured by the men in the chaise? Or was she still capable of controlling her own actions; and were we two following our widely parted roads towards one point in the mysterious

future, at which we were to meet once more?

It was a relief when the hour came to lock my door, to bid farewell to London pursuits, London pupils, and London friends, and to be in movement again towards new interests and a new life. Even the bustle and confusion at the railway terminus, so wearisome and bewildering at other times, roused me and did me good.

My travelling instructions directed me to go to Carlisle, and then to diverge by a branch railway which ran in the direction of the coast. As a misfortune to begin with, our engine broke down between Lancaster and Carlisle. The delay occasioned by this accident caused me to be too late for the branch train, by which I was to have gone on immediately. I had to wait some hours; and when a later train finally deposited me at the nearest station to Limmeridge House, it was past ten, and the night was so dark that I could hardly see my way to the pony-chaise which Mr Fairlie had ordered to be in waiting for me.

The driver was evidently discomposed by the lateness of my arrival. He was in that state of highly respectful sulkiness which is peculiar to English servants. We drove away slowly through the darkness in perfect silence. The roads were bad, and the dense obscurity of the night increased the difficulty of getting over the ground quickly. It was, by my watch, nearly an hour and a half from the time of our leaving the station before I heard the sound of the sea in the distance, and the crunch of our wheels on a smooth gravel drive. We had passed one gate before entering the drive, and we passed another before we drew up at the house. I was received by a solemn man-servant out of livery, was informed that the family had retired for the night, and was then led into a large and lofty room where my supper was awaiting me, in a forlorn manner, at one extremity of a lonesome mahogany wilderness of dining-table.

I was too tired and out of spirits to eat or drink much, especially with the solemn servant waiting on me as elaborately as if a small dinner party had arrived at the house instead of a solitary man. In a quarter of an hour I was ready to be taken up to my bedchamber. The solemn servant conducted me into a prettily furnished room – said, 'Breakfast at nine o'clock, sir' – looked all round him to see that everything was in its proper place, and noiselessly withdrew.

'What shall I see in my dreams tonight?' I thought to myself, as I put out the candle; 'the woman in white? or the unknown inhabitants of this Cumberland mansion?' It was a strange sensation to be sleeping in the house, like a friend of the family, and yet not to know one of the inmates, even by sight!