

The Woman in White

Wilkie Collins

Part One

The story is told by Walter Hartright, teacher of art

Chapter 1 - The Woman in White

It was the last day of July, 1849, and the heat in London had been terrible all day. I was sitting in my room, trying to read, but I couldn't concentrate on my book. It was too hot and the constant noises from the street disturbed me. So as I had many things to think about, I decided to go for a walk in the cool evening air.

My name is Walter Hartright and I'm an art teacher. This was my last night in London. Early the following morning I was due to travel to Cumberland in the north of England. I had been offered a job there — at a place called Limmeridge House, near the small village of Limmeridge.

My future employer was a gentleman called Mr Frederick Fairlie. He had advertised for an art teacher to teach drawing and sketching to his two nieces. This teacher would live at Limmeridge House with the family.

I knew I was very lucky to get this job. Teaching the young ladies would be easy and pleasant, and the pay and working conditions were excellent. But at the same time I had a very strange feeling about the job. I didn't want to take it, but I couldn't explain why. Perhaps even then I knew deep inside that it would change my life for ever.

I was still thinking about Limmeridge House when I reached Hampstead Heath, a wide area of open parkland in the north of London. By now the moon had risen and the night air felt wonderful — fresh and cool.

There was a road stretching out across the Heath and I began to walk along it. Nobody else was around. I was passing by some trees on one side of the road when suddenly somebody touched me lightly on the shoulder from behind.

Every drop of blood inside me froze. I turned round, my hand tightening on the handle of my stick.

There, in the middle of the wide road — there, as if she had just that moment sprung out of the earth or dropped from heaven — stood the figure of a lonely woman, dressed from head to foot all in white.

'Is this the road to London?' she asked.

Her face looked thin and pale in the moonlight, and there was something very sad about her expression. She had fair hair and large trusting eyes, and in her hand she carried a small bag. I guessed her to be about twenty-two years old.

What on earth was such a woman doing all by herself in this lonely place?

'Please, sir,' she repeated, 'is this the road to London?'

'Yes,' I replied. 'But where did you come from? I didn't see you until you touched me. You gave me quite a shock.'

'I was hiding among those trees,' she replied. 'I saw you pass by, but I was afraid to speak to you until I had seen your face. When I saw that your face was kind, I followed you and touched you. Will you help me?'

She looked so sad and lonely that I agreed. I couldn't do anything else.

'All right I said. 'Tell me how I can help you.'

'I don't know London very well,' she said. 'But I have a friend here, a lady, who will be very glad to see me. I can stay with her but I need a carriage to take me to her house. Can you help me find one?'

'Yes, of course,' I said. 'Come with me.'

We set off walking back to London together. The whole experience was like a dream. Who was this mysterious woman?

'I want to ask you something: she said suddenly 'Do you know anybody in London with the title of Baronet?'

As she asked me this, she was staring hard into my face. I was astonished by her question.

'Why do you ask?' I said.

'Because there is one baronet who is cruel and wicked,' she replied. 'I hope you don't know him.'

'No: I said, 'I don't know any baronets. I'm only a humble teacher of art. Who is this wicked baronet?'

'I can't tell you any more.' the woman said, looking very upset. 'Please don't ask me any more questions.'

We walked for some time in silence before she spoke again.

'Do you live in London?' she asked.

'Yes,' I replied. 'But tomorrow I'm going away to the north of England - to Cumberland.'

'Cumberland!' she repeated. 'How I wish I was going there too. I was happy in Cumberland once. When I was a child, I spent several months in a village called Limmeridge and I went to the local village school. It was run by a dear, kind lady called Mrs Fairlie, who was my good friend. Mrs Fairlie's husband was very rich and they lived in a big house, called Limmeridge House, just outside the village.'

Now it was my turn to stare. Limmeridge House was the very place I was going to. I couldn't believe it.

'Mrs Fairlie is dead now,' continued the strange woman. 'She had a pretty little girl a bit younger than I was. I suppose the little girl must have grown up and gone away.'

I was about to ask my mysterious companion some more questions, but by now we were getting near the centre of London. As we turned a corner, we noticed a carriage standing outside some houses.

'I'm so tired,' said the woman. 'I don't think I can walk any further. Let me take that carriage.'

I saw that the driver had a kind face and I was sure he wouldn't harm her. She got into the carriage but I didn't hear what address she gave to the driver. The carriage set off slowly. Gradually the sound of its wheels grew fainter as it disappeared into the darkness.

The Woman in White had gone.

Chapter 2 - Walter Arrives at Limmeridge House

The following day I travelled to Cumberland. The journey was very long and it was late in the evening when I arrived at Limmeridge House. Except for one servant, everybody had gone to bed, and as I was very tired, I went to bed too.

Next morning, when I got up, the sun was shining. From my window I had a wonderful view of the gardens stretching down to the bright blue sea in the distance. It was all so different from my tiny room in London that I began to feel enthusiastic and happy about starting my new life.

At nine o'clock I went downstairs to the breakfast room. When I opened the door, I saw a young lady standing by the far window, looking out across the garden. She turned and came towards me, holding out her hand and smiling warmly

She had thick black hair and dark shining eyes. She wasn't at all beautiful but the expression on her face was bright, friendly and intelligent. I liked her immediately

'Good morning, Mr Hartright,' she said. 'I hope you slept well. I'm Marian Halcombe, one of your two pupils here. Laura, your other pupil, is still in her room. She has a slight headache, but you'll be able to meet her later.'

'Is Laura your sister?' I asked.

'She's my half-sister,' replied Miss Halcombe. 'My mother married twice. Her first husband was

Mr Halcombe, my father. Then he died and later my mother married Mr Fairlie, Laura's father and the owner of Limmeridge House.

'Although we shared the same mother, Laura and I are very different both in character and situation. My father was poor and Laura's father was rich, so I have no money and she has a fortune. I'm ugly and bad-tempered and she's beautiful and behaves like an angel.'

'Is Laura's father dead too?' I asked.

'Yes. His brother, Mr Frederick Fairlie, your employer, is now the owner of this house. You'll meet him after breakfast. He's not very keen on visitors; he has great trouble with his nerves and never leaves his room.'

'I do hope you'll be happy with us,' continued Miss Halcombe. 'We enjoy living here, but it's very quiet. We don't have any of the excitement or adventures which you must be used to in London.'

Immediately her words reminded me of the Woman in White.

'I don't need any more adventures,' I said. 'Two nights ago, I had an adventure which I will never forget.'

Then I told Miss Halcombe about my meeting with the mysterious woman on Hampstead Heath.

'The strange thing is that she mentioned your mother, Mrs Fairlie,' I said. 'She seemed to have known her and loved her very much. Do you know who this woman can possibly be?'

Miss Halcombe shook her head. She looked interested but also astonished. Clearly she had no idea who the Woman in White could be.

'It's a complete mystery,' she said. 'But I have an idea which may help us to solve it. Upstairs I have a large collection of my mother's letters. I'll read through them and see if I can find any information about this woman. Meanwhile, it's time for you to visit Mr Fairlie.'

We arranged to meet later and I went upstairs to Mr Fairlie's room. He was sitting in an armchair, reading. He was about sixty years old with a delicate, nervous face. When he spoke, his voice sounded tired and complaining. As I came into the room, he waved his hand towards a chair.

'Do sit down, Mr Hartright,' he said. 'But would you mind not making any noise. My nerves are very delicate, you know. Have you got everything you want? Do you like your room?'

'Everything is fine,' I started to say, but to my surprise Mr Fairlie held up his hand and stopped me.

'Please,' he said, 'would you mind not speaking so loud? My nerves are very delicate. Have you met Marian and Laura?'

'I've only met Marian,' I said. 'What kind of art would you like me to teach the two young ladies?'

'I'm afraid I don't feel strong enough to discuss that,' said Mr Fairlie. 'You must ask Marian and Laura. Mr Hartright, it's been a great pleasure meeting you, but now I'm getting tired. Please excuse me, and please don't bang the door on your way out. So kind of you. Good morning!'

It was a great relief to get out of Mr Fairlie's room. Clearly he was a very self-centred person who was interested in nothing except his own health. I went downstairs and found Miss Halcombe waiting for me.

'Laura's in the garden: she said. 'Do come and meet her.'

On the way she said, 'I've found out something interesting. I've been reading my mother's letters and in one of them she mentions a little girl called Anne Catherick, who was visiting Limmeridge one summer with her mother. My mother had set up a school for the village children and while Anne was in Limmeridge, she went to this school.'

'My mother writes about Anne Catherick with great affection. Anne told her that she would always wear white to remember her by, as my mother's favourite colour was white.'

'So it's quite possible that the Woman in White is Anne Catherick grown-up,' I said slowly. 'What happened to Anne?'

'I don't know,' said Miss Halcombe. 'She and her mother left Limmeridge after a few months and never came back. There is no further mention of her in my mother's letters.'

As we were talking, we had been walking across the garden to the summer house. I saw a young

lady sitting inside at a table, drawing, with her head bent closely over her work. She was wearing a pretty summer dress and had golden hair.

‘There’s Laura,’ whispered Miss Halcombe. Then more loudly she said, ‘Laura, I’ve brought our new art teacher, Mr Hartright, to meet you.’

At once the young lady looked up from her drawing and her eyes met mine. She had a lovely face and the most beautiful smile in the world. But there was something else about her too — something that troubled and disturbed me. Had I met her before? I didn’t think so. But she reminded me of somebody I knew.

Then I realized. Impossible as it may seem, Laura Fairlie looked very much like the Woman in White!