THE WOMAN IN WHITE.
PART THE THIRD.
HARTRIGHT'S NARRATIVE. IV.

My first conviction, as soon as I found myself outside the house, was that no alternative was left me but to act at once on the information I had received—to make sure of the Count, that night, or to risk the loss, if I only delayed till the morning, of Laura's last chance. I looked at my watch: it was ten o'clock.

Not the shadow of a doubt crossed my mind of the purpose for which the Count had left the theatre. His escape from us, that evening, was, beyond all question, the preliminary only to his escape from London. The mark of the Brotherhood was on his arm—I felt as certain of it as if he had shown me the brand—and the betrayal of the Brotherhood was on his conscience—I had seen it in his recognition of Pesca.

It was easy to understand why that recognition had not been mutual. A man of the Count's character would never risk the terrible consequences of turning spy without looking to his personal security quite as carefully as he looked to his golden reward. The shaven face, which I had pointed out at the Opera, might have been covered by a beard in Pesca's time; his dark brown hair might be a wig. The accident of time might have helped him as well—his immense corpulence might have come with his later years. There was every reason why Pesca should not have known him again—every reason, also, why he should have known Pesca, whose singular personal appearance made a marked man of him, go where he might.

I have said that I felt certain of the purpose in the Count's mind when he escaped us at the theatre. How could I doubt it, when I saw, with my own eyes, that he believed himself, in spite of the change in his appearance, to have been recognised by Pesca, and to be therefore in danger of his life? If I could get speech of him that night, if I could show him that I, too, knew of the mortal peril in which he stood, what result would follow? Plainly this. One of us must be master of the situation—one of us must inevitably be at the mercy of the other.

I owed it to myself to consider the chances against me, before I confronted them. I owed it to my wife to do all that lay in my power to lessen the risk.

The chances against me wanted no reckoning up: they were all merged in one. If the Count discovered, by my own avowal, that the direct way to his safety lay through my life, he was probably the last man in existence who would shrink from throwing me off my guard and taking that way, when he had me alone within his reach. The only means of defence against him on which I could at all rely to lessen the risk, presented themselves, after a little careful thinking, clearly enough. Before I made any personal acknowledgment of my discovery in his presence, I must place the discovery itself where it would be ready for instant use against him, and safe from any attempt at suppression on his part. If I laid the mine under his feet before I approached him, and if I left instructions with a third person to fire it, on the expiration of a certain time, unless directions to the contrary were previously received under my own hand, or from my own lips—in that event, the Count's security was absolutely dependent upon mine, and I might hold the vantage ground over him securely, even in his own house.

This idea occurred to me when I was close to the new lodgings which we had taken on returning from the sea-side. I went in, without disturbing any one, by the help of my key. A light was in the hall; and I stole up with it to my workroom, to make my preparations, and absolutely to commit myself to an interview with the Count, before either Laura or Marian could have the slightest suspicion of what I intended to do.

A letter addressed to Pesca represented the surest measure of precaution which it was now possible for me to take. I wrote as follows:
"The man whom I pointed out to you at the Opera, is a member of the Brotherhood, and has been false to his trust. Put both these assertions to the test, instantly. You know the name he goes by in England. His address is No. 5, Forest-road, St. John's Wood. On the love you once bore me, use the power entrusted to you, without mercy and without delay, against that man. I have risked all and lost all—and the forfeit of my failure has been paid with my life."

I signed and dated these lines, enclosed them in an envelope, and sealed it up. On the outside, I wrote this direction: "Keep the enclosure unopened, until nine o'clock tomorrow morning. If you do not hear from me, or see me, before that time, break the seal when the clock strikes, and read the contents."

I added my initials; and protected the whole by enclosing it in a second sealed envelope, addressed to Pesca at his lodgings.

Nothing remained to be done after this, but to find the means of sending my letter to its destination immediately. I should then have accomplished all that lay in my power. If anything happened to me in the Count's house, I had now provided for his answering it with his life. That the means of preventing his escape under any circumstances whatever, were at Pesca's disposal, if he chose to exert them, I did not for an instant doubt. The extraordinary anxiety which he had expressed to remain unenlightened as to the Count's identity—or, in other words, to be left uncertain enough about facts to justify him to his own conscience in remaining passive—betrayed plainly that the means of exercising the terrible justice of the Brotherhood were ready to his hand, although, as a naturally humane man, he had shrunk from plainly saying as much in my presence. The deadly certainty with which the vengeance of foreign political societies can hunt down a traitor to the cause, hide himself where he may, had been too often exemplified, even in my superficial experience, to allow of any doubt. Considering the subject only as a reader of newspapers, cases recurred to my memory, both in London and in Paris, of foreigners found stabbed in the streets, whose assassins could never be traced—of bodies and parts of bodies, thrown into the Thames and the Seine, by hands that could never be discovered—of deaths by secret violence which could only be accounted for in one way. I have disguised nothing relating to myself in these pages—and I do not disguise here—that I believed I had written Count Fosco's death-warrant, if the fatal emergency happened which authorised Pesca to open my enclosure.

I left my room to go down to the groundfloor of the house, and speak to the landlord about finding me a messenger. He happened to be ascending the stairs at the time, and we met on the landing. His son, a quick lad, was the messenger he proposed to me, on hearing what I wanted. We had the boy upstairs; and I gave him his directions. He was to take the letter in a cab, to put it into Professor Pesca's own hands, and to bring me back a line of acknowledgment from that gentleman; returning in the cab, and keeping it at the door for my use. It was then nearly half-past ten. I calculated that the boy might be back in twenty minutes; and that I might drive to St. John's Wood, on his return, in twenty minutes more.

When the lad had departed on his errand, I returned to my own room for a little while, to put certain papers in order, so that they might be easily found, in case of the worst. The key of the old-fashioned bureau in which the papers were kept, I sealed up, and left it on my table, with Marian's name written on the outside of the little packet. This done, I went downstairs to the sitting-room, in which I expected to find Laura and Marian awaiting my return from the Opera. I felt my hand trembling for the first
time, when I laid it on the lock of the door.

No one was in the room but Marian. She was reading; and she looked at her watch, in surprise, when I came in.

"How early you are back!" she said. "You must have come away before the opera was over."

"Yes," I replied; "neither Pesca nor I waited for the end. Where is Laura?"

"She had one of her bad headaches this evening; and I advised her to go to bed, when we had done tea."

I left the room again, on the pretext of wishing to see whether Laura was asleep. Marian's quick eyes were beginning to look inquiringly at my face; Marian's quick instinct was beginning to discover that I had something weighing on my mind.

When I entered the bed-chamber, and softly approached the bedside by the dim flicker of the night—lamp, my wife was asleep.

We had not been married quite a month yet. If my heart was heavy, if my resolution for a moment faltered again, when I looked at her face turned faithfully to my pillow in her sleep, when I saw her hand resting open on the coverlid, as if it was waiting unconsciously for mine, surely there was some excuse for me? I only allowed myself a few minutes to kneel down at the bedside, and to look close at her—so close that her breath, as it came and went fluttered on my face. I only touched her hand and her cheek with my lips, at parting. I lingered for an instant at the door to look at her again. "God bless and keep you, my darling!" I whispered—and left her.

Marian was at the stair-head waiting for me. She had a folded slip of paper in her hand.

"The landlord's son has brought this for you," she said. "He has got a cab at the door—he says you ordered him to keep it at your disposal."

"Quite right, Marian. I want the cab; I am going out again."

I descended the stairs as I spoke, and looked into the sitting-room to read the slip of paper by the light on the table. It contained these two sentences, in Pesca's handwriting:

"Your letter is received. If I don't see you before the time you mention, I will break the seal when the clock strikes."

I placed the paper in my pocket-book and made for the door. Marian met me on the threshold, and pushed me back into the room where the candlelight fell full on my face. She held me by both hands, and her eyes fastened searchingly on mine.

"I see!" she said, in a low eager whisper. "You are trying the last chance: to-night."

Yes—the last chance and the best," I whispered back.

"Not alone! Oh, Walter, for God's sake, not alone! Let me go with you. Don't refuse me because I'm only a woman. I must go! I will go! I'll wait outside in the cab!"

It was my turn, now, to hold her. She tried to break away from me, and get down first to the door.

"If you want to help me," I said, "stop here, and sleep in my wife's room to-night. Only let me go away, with my mind easy about Laura, and I answer for everything else. Come, Marian, give me a kiss, and show that you have the courage to wait till I come back."

I dared not allow her time to say a word more. She tried to hold me again. I unclasped her hands—and was out of the room in a moment. The boy below heard me on the stairs, and opened the half-door. I jumped into the cab, before the driver could get off the box. "Forest-road, St. John's Wood," I called to him through the front window. "Double fare if you get there in a quarter of an hour." "I'll do it, sir." I looked at my watch. Eleven o'clock—not a minute to lose.
The rapid motion of the cab, the sense that every instant now was bringing me nearer to the Count, the conviction that I was embarked at last, without let or hindrance, on my hazardous enterprise, heated me into such a fever of excitement that I shouted to the man to go faster and faster. As we left the streets, and crossed St. John’s Wood-road, my impatience so completely overpowered me that I stood up in the cab and stretched my head out of the window, to see the end of the journey before we reached it. Just as a church clock in the distance struck the quarter past, we turned into the Forest-road. I stopped the driver a little away from the Count’s house, paid, and dismissed him and walked on to the door.

As I approached the garden gate, I saw another person advancing towards it also, from the direction opposite to mine. We met under the gas-lamp in the road, and looked at each other. I instantly recognised the light-haired foreigner, with the scar on his cheek; and I thought he recognised me. He said nothing; and, instead of stopping at the house, as I did, he slowly walked on. Was he in the Forest-road by accident? Or had he followed the Count home from the Opera?

I did not pursue those questions. After waiting a little, till the foreigner had slowly passed out of sight, I rang the gate bell. It was then twenty; minutes past eleven—late enough to make it quite easy for the Count to get rid of me by the excuse that he was in bed.

The only way of providing against this contingency was to send in my name, without asking any preliminary questions, and to let him know, at the same time, that I had a serious motive for wishing to see him at that late hour. Accordingly, while I was waiting, I took out my card, and wrote, under my name, "On important business," The maid-servant answered the door, while I was writing the last word in pencil; and asked me distrustfully what I "pleased to want."

"Be so good as to take that to your master," I replied, giving her the card.

I saw, by the girl’s hesitation of manner, that if I had asked for the Count in the first instance, she would only have followed her instructions by telling me he was not at home. She was staggered by the confidence with which I gave her the card: After staring at me in great perturbation, she went back into the house with my message, closing the door, and leaving me to wait in the garden.

In a minute or so, she reappeared. "Her master’s compliments, and would I be so obliging as to say what my business was?" "Take my compliments back!" I replied; "and say that the business cannot be mentioned to any one but your master." She left me again—again returned—and, this time, asked me to walk in.

There was no lamp in the hall; but by the dim light of the kitchen candle which the girl had brought upstairs with her, I saw an elderly lady steal noiselessly out of a back room on the ground floor. She cast one vipers look, at me as I entered the hall, but said nothing, and went slowly upstairs, without returning my bow. My familiarity with Marian’s journal sufficiently assured me that the elderly lady was Madame Fosco.

The servant led me to the room which the Countess had just left. I entered it; and found myself face to face with the Count.

He was still in his evening dress, except his coat, which he had thrown across a chair. His shirt-sleeves were turned up at the wrists—but no higher. A carpet-bag was on one side of him, and a box on the other. Books, papers, and articles of wearing apparel were scattered about the room. On a table, at one side of the door, stood the cage, so well known to me by description, which contained his white mice. The canaries and the cockatoo were probably in some other room. He was seated before the box, packing it, when I went in, and rose with some papers in his hand to receive me. His face still betrayed plain
traces of the shock that had overwhelmed him at the Opera. His fat cheeks hung loose; his cold grey eyes were furtively vigilant; his voice, look, and manner were all sharply suspicious alike, as he advanced a step to meet me, and requested, with distant civility, that I would take a chair.

"You come here on business, sir?" he said. "I am at a loss to know what that business can possibly be."

The unconcealed curiosity with which he looked hard in my face while he spoke, convinced me that I had passed unnoticed by him at the Opera. He had seen Pesca first; and from that moment, till he left the theatre, he had evidently seen nothing else. My name would necessarily suggest to him that I had not come into his house with other than Hostile purpose towards himself—but he appeared to be utterly ignorant, thus far, of the real nature of my errand. "I am fortunate in finding you here tonight," I said. "You seem to be on the point of taking a journey?"

"Is your business connected with my journey?"

"In some degree."

"In what degree? Do you know where I am going to?"

"No. I only know why you are leaving London."

He slipped by me with the quickness of thought; locked the door of the room; and put the key in his pocket.

"You and I, Mr. Hartright, are excellently well acquainted with one another by reputation," he said. "Did it, by any chance, occur to you when you came to this house that I was not the sort of man you could trifle with?"

"It did occur to me," I replied. "And I have not come to trifle with you. I am here on a matter of life and death—and if that door which you have locked was open at this moment, nothing you could say or do would induce me to pass through it."

I walked farther into the room and stood opposite to him, on the rug before the fireplace. He drew a chair in front of the door, and sat down on it, with his left arm resting on the table. The cage with the white mice was close to him; and the little creatures scampered out of their sleeping-place, as his heavy arm shook the table, and peered at him through the gaps in the smartly painted wires.

"On a matter of life and death?" he repeated to himself. "Those words are more serious, perhaps, than you think. What do you mean?"

"What I say."

The perspiration broke out thickly on his broad forehead. His left hand stole over the edge of the table. There was a drawer in it, with a lock, and the key was in the lock. His finger and thumb closed over the key, but did not turn it.

"So you know why I am leaving London?" he went on. "Tell me the reason, if you please." He turned the key, and unlocked the drawer as he spoke.

"I can do better than that," I replied; "I can show you the reason, if you like."

"How can you show it?"

"You have got your coat off," I said. "Roll up the shirt-sleeve on your left arm—and you will see it there."

The same livid, leaden change passed over his face, which I had seen pass over it at the theatre. The deadly glitter in his eyes shone steady and straight into mine. He said nothing. But his left hand slowly opened the table drawer, and softly slipped into it. The harsh grating noise of something heavy that he was moving, unseen to me, sounded for a moment—then ceased. The silence that followed was so intense, that the faint ticking nibble of the white mice at their wires was distinctly audible where I stood.

My life hung by a thread—and I knew it. At that final moment, I thought with his mind; I felt with his fingers—I was as certain, as if I
had seen it, of what he kept hidden from me in
the drawer.

"Wait a little," I said. "You have got the
door locked—you see I don't move—you see
my hands are empty. Wait a little. I have some-
thing more to say."

"You have said enough," he replied, with a
sudden composure, so unnatural and so ghastly
that it tried my nerves as no outbreak of vio-
lence could have tried them. "I want one mo-
ment for my own thoughts, if you please. Do
you guess what I am thinking about?"

"Perhaps I do."

"I am thinking," he said, "whether I shall add
to the disorder in this room, by scattering your
brains about the fireplace."

If I had moved at that moment, I saw in his
face that he would have done it.

"I advise you to read two lines of writing which
I have about me," I rejoined, "before you finally
decide that question."

The proposal appeared to excite his curiosity.
He nodded his head. I took Pesca's acknowl-
edgment of the receipt of my letter out of my
pocket-book; handed it to him at arm's length;
and returned to my former position in front of
the fireplace.

He read the lines aloud: "Your letter is re-
ceived. If I don't hear from you before the time
you mention, I will break the seal when the clock
strikes."

Another man, in his position, would have
needed some explanation of those words—the
Count felt no such necessity. One reading of
the note showed him the precaution that I had
taken, as plainly as if he had been present at
the time when I adopted it. The expression of
his face changed on the instant; and his hand
came out of the drawer, empty.

"I don't lock up my drawer, Mr. Hartright," he said; "and I don't say that I may not scatter
your brains about the fireplace, yet. But I am a just man, even to my enemy—and I will
acknowledge, beforehand, that they are cleverer
brains than I thought them. Come to the point,
sir! You want something of me?"

"I do—and I mean to have it."

"On conditions?"

"On no conditions."

His hand dropped into the drawer again.

"Bah! we are travelling in a circle," he said;

"and those clever brains of yours are in dan-
ger again. Your tone is deplorably impruden-
t, sir—moderate it on the spot! The risk of sho-
ting you on the place where you stand, is less
to me, than the risk of letting you out of this
house, except on conditions that I dictate and
approve. You have not got my lamented friend
to deal with, now—you are face to face with
Fosco! If the lives of twenty Mr. Hartrights
were the stepping-stones to my safety, over all
those stones I would go, sustained by my sub-
lime indifference, self-balanced by my impen-
trable calm. Respect me, if you love your

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own life! I summon you to answer three ques-
tions, before you open your lips again. Hear
them—they are necessary to this interview. An-
swer them they are necessary to ME." He held
up one finger of his right hand. "First ques-
tion!" he said. "You come here possessed of in-
formation, which may be true, or may be false—
where did you get it?"

"I decline to tell you."

"No matter: I shall find out. If that informa-
tion is true—mind I say, with the whole force
of my resolution, if—you are making your mar-
ket of it here, by treachery of your own, or by
treachery of some other man. I note that cir-
cumstance, for future use, in my memory which
forgets nothing, and proceed." He held up an-
other finger. "Second question! Those lines
you invited me to read, are without signature. Who wrote them?"

"A man whom I have every reason to depend
on; and whom you have every reason to fear."

My answer reached him to some purpose. His
left hand trembled audibly in the drawer.

"How long do you give me," he asked, putting his third question in a quieter tone, "before the clock strikes and the seal is broken?"

"Time enough for you to come to my terms," I replied.

"Give me a plainer answer, Mr. Hartright. What hour is the clock to strike?"

"Nine, to-morrow morning."

"Nine, to-morrow morning? Yes, yes—your trap is laid for me, before I can get my passport regulated, and leave London. It is not earlier, I suppose? We will see about that, presently I can keep you hostage here, and bargain with you to send for your letter before I let you go. In the mean time, be so good, next, as to mention your terms."

"You shall hear them. They are simple, and soon stated. You know whose interests I represent in coming here?"

He smiled with the most supreme composure; and carelessly waved his right hand.

"I consent to hazard a guess," he said, jeeringly. "A lady's interests, of course!"

"My Wife's interests."

He looked at me with the first honest expression that had crossed his face in my presence—an expression of blank amazement. I could see that I sank in his estimation, as a dangerous man, from that moment. He shut up the drawer at once, folded his arms over his breast, and listened to me with a smile of satirical attention.

"You are well enough aware," I went on, "of the course which my inquiries have taken for many months past, to know that any attempted denial of plain facts will be quite useless in my presence. You are guilty of an infamous conspiracy. And the gin of a fortune of ten thousand pounds was your motive for it."

He said nothing. But his face became overclouded suddenly by a lowering anxiety.

"Keep your gain," I said, (His face lightened again immediately, and his eyes opened on me in wider and wider astonishment.) "I am not here to disgrace myself by bargaining for money which has passed through your hands, and which has been the price of a vile crime—"

"Gently, Mr. Hartright. Your moral clap-traps have an excellent effect in England—keep them for yourself and your own countrymen, if you please. The ten thousand pounds was a legacy left to my excellent wife by the late Mr. Fairlie. Place the affair on those grounds; and I will discuss it, if you please. To a man of my sentiments, however, the subject is deplorably sordid. I prefer to pass it over. I invite you to resume the discussion of your terms. What do you demand?"

"In the first place, I demand a full confession of the conspiracy, written and signed in my presence, by yourself."

He raised his finger again. "One!" he said, checking me off with the steady attention of a practical man.

"In the second place, I demand a plain proof, which does not depend on your personal asseveration, of the date at which my wife left Blackwater Park, and travelled to London."

"So! so! you can lay your finger, I see, on the weak place," he remarked, composedly. "Any more?"

"At present, no more."

"Good! You have mentioned your terms; now listen to mine. The responsibility to myself of admitting, what you are pleased to call the 'conspiracy,' is less, perhaps, upon the whole, than the responsibility of laying you dead on that hearth-rug. Let us say that I meet your proposal—on my own conditions. The statement you demand of me shall be written; and the plain proof shall be produced. You call a letter from my late lamented friend, informing me of the day and hour of his wife's arrival in London, written, signed, and dated by himself, a proof, I suppose? I can give you this. I can also send you to the man of whom I hired the carriage to fetch my visitor from the rail-
way, on the day when she arrived—his order-book may help you to your date, even if his coachman who drove me proves to be of no use. These things I can do, and will do, on conditions. I recite them. First condition! Madame Fosco and I leave this house, when and how we please, without interference of any kind, on your part. Second condition! You wait here, in company with me, to see my agent, who is coming at seven o'clock in the morning to regulate my affairs. You give my agent a written order to the man who has got your sealed letter to resign his possession of it. You wait here till my agent places that letter unopened in my hands; and you then allow me one clear half-hour to leave the house—after which you resume your own freedom of action, and go where you please. Third condition! You give me the satisfaction of a gentleman, for your intrusion into my private affairs, and for the language you have allowed yourself to use to me, at this conference. The time and place, abroad, to be fixed in a letter from my hand when I am safe on the Continent; and that letter to contain a strip of paper measuring accurately the length of my sword. Those are my terms. Inform me if you accept them—Yes, or No."

The extraordinary mixture of prompt decision, far-sighted cunning, and mountebank bravado in this speech, staggered me for a moment—and only for a moment. The one question to consider was, whether I was justified, or not, in possessing myself of the means of establishing Laura’s identity, at the cost of allowing the scoundrel who had robbed her of it to escape me with impunity. I knew that the motive of securing the just recognition of my wife in the birthplace from which she had been driven out as an impostor, and of publicly erasing the lie that still profaned her mother’s tombstone, was far purer, in its freedom from all taint of evil passion, than the vindictive motive which had mingled itself with my purpose from the first. And yet I cannot honestly say that my own moral convictions were strong enough to decide the struggle in me, by themselves. They were helped by my remembrance of Sir Percival’s death. How awfully, at the last moment, had the working of the retribution, there, been snatched from my feeble hands! What right had I to decide, in my poor mortal ignorance of the future, that this man, too, must escape with impunity, because he escaped me? I thought of these things—perhaps, with the superstition inherent in my nature; perhaps, with a sense worthier of me than superstition. It was hard, when I had fastened my hold on him, at last, to loosen it again of my own accord—but I forced myself to make the sacrifice. In plainer words, I determined to be guided by the one higher motive of which I was certain, the motive of serving the cause of Laura and the cause of Truth.

"I accept your conditions," I said. "With one reservation, on my part."

"What reservation may that be?" he asked.

"It refers to the sealed letter," I answered. "I require you to destroy it, unopened, in my presence, as soon as it is placed in your hands."

My object in making this stipulation was simply to prevent him from carrying away written evidence of the nature of my communication with Pesca. The fact of my communication he would necessarily discover, when I gave the address to his agent, in the morning. But he could make no use of it, on his own unsupported testimony—even if he really ventured to try the experiment—which need excite in me the slightest apprehension on Pesca’s account.

"I grant your reservation," he replied, after considering the question gravely for a minute or two. "It is not worth dispute—the letter shall be destroyed when it comes into my hands."

He rose, as he spoke, from the chair in which he had been sitting opposite to me, up to this time. With one effort, he appeared to free his mind from the whole pressure on it of the in-
terview between us, thus far. "Ouf!" he cried, stretching his arms luxuriously; "the skirmish was hot while it lasted. Take a seat, Mr. Hartright. We meet as mortal enemies hereafter—let us, like gallant gentlemen, exchange polite attentions in the mean time. Permit me to take the liberty of calling for my wife."

He unlocked and opened the door. "Eleanor!" he called out, in his deep voice. The lady of the viperish face came in. "Madame Fosco—Mr. Hartright," said the Count, introducing us with easy dignity. "My angel," he went on, addressing his wife; "will your labours of packing-up allow you time to make me some nice strong coffee? I have writing-business to transact with Mr. Hartright and I require the full possession of my intelligence to do justice to myself."

Madame Fosco bowed her head twice—once sternly to me; once submissively to her husband—and glided out of the room.

The Count walked to a writing-table near the window; opened his desk, and took from it several quires of paper and a bundle of quill pens. He scattered the pens about the table, so that they might lie ready in all directions to be taken up when wanted, and then cut the paper into a heap of narrow slips, of the form used by professional writers for the press. "I shall make this a remarkable document," he said, looking at me over his shoulder. "Habits of literary composition are perfectly familiar to me. One of the rarest of all the intellectual accomplishments that man can possess, is the grand faculty of arranging his ideas. Immense privilege! I possess it. Do you?"

He marched backwards and forwards in the room, until the coffee appeared, humming to himself, and marking the places at which obstacles occurred in the arrangement of his ideas, by striking his forehead, from time to time, with the palm of his hand. The enormous audacity with which he seized on the situation in which I had placed him, and made it the pedestal on which his vanity mounted for the one cherished purpose of self-display, mastered my astonishment by main force. Sincerely as I loathed the man, the prodigious strength of his character, even in its most trivial aspects, impressed me in spite of myself.

The coffee was brought in by Madame Fosco. He kissed her hand, in grateful acknowledgment, and escorted her to the door; returned, poured out a cup of coffee for himself, and took it to the writing-table.

"May I offer you some coffee, Mr. Hartright?" he said, before he sat down.

I declined.

"What! you think I shall poison you?" he said, gaily. "The English intellect is sound, so far as it goes," he continued, seating himself at the table; "but it has one grave defect—it is always cautious in the wrong place."

He dipped his pen in the ink; placed the first slip of paper before him, with a thump of his hand on the desk; cleared his throat; and began. He wrote with great noise and rapidity, in so large and bold a hand, and with such wide spaces between the lines, that he reached the bottom of the slip in not more than two minutes certainly from the time when he started at the top. Each slip as he finished it, was paged, and tossed over his shoulder, out of his way, on the floor. When his first pen was worn out, that went over his shoulder too; and he pounced on a second from the supply scattered about the table. Slip after slip, by dozens, by fifties, by hundreds, flew over his shoulders on either side of him, till he had snowed himself up in paper all round his chair. Hour after hour passed—and there I sat, watching; there he sat, writing. He never stopped, except to sip his coffee; and when that was exhausted, to smack his forehead, from time to time. One o'clock struck, two, three, four—and still the slips flew about all round him; still the untiring pen scraped its way ceaselessly from top to bottom of the page;
still the white chaos of paper rose higher and higher all round his chair. At four o'clock, I heard a sudden splutter of the pen, indicative of the flourish with which he signed his name. "Bravo!" he cried—springing to his feet with the activity of a young man, and looking me straight in the face with a smile of superb triumph.

"Done, Mr. Hartright!" he announced, with a self-renovating thump of his list on his broad breast. "Done, to my own profound satisfaction—to your profound astonishment, when you read what I have written. The subject is exhausted: the ManFosco is not. I proceed to the arrangement of my slips, to the revision of my slips, to the reading of my slips addressed, emphatically, to your private ear. Four o'clock has just struck. Good! Arrangement, revision, reading, from four to five. Short snooze of restoration for myself, from five to six. Final preparations, from six to seven. Affair of agent and sealed letter from seven to eight. At eight, en route. Behold the programme!"

He sat down cross-legged on the floor, among his papers; strung them together with a bodkin and a piece of string; revised them; wrote all the titles and honours by which he was personally distinguished, at the head of the first page; and then read the manuscript to me, with loud theatrical emphasis and profuse theatrical gesticulation. The reader will have an opportunity, ere long, of forming his own opinion of the document. It will be sufficient to mention here that it answered my purpose.

His next proceeding was to write me the address of the person from whom he had hired the fly to go to the railway, and to hand me Sir Percival's letter. I read this last with breathless interest. It only contained a few lines; but it distinctly announced the arrival of "Lady Glyde" in London, by the midday train from Blackwater, on the 29th of July, 1850—exactly, as I had supposed, one day after the date of her (assumed) death on the doctor's certificate.

"Are you satisfied?" asked the Count. "I am."

"A quarter past five," he said, looking at his watch. "Time for my restorative snooze. I personally resemble Napoleon the Great (as you may have remarked, Mr. Hartright)—I also resemble that immortal man in my power of commanding sleep at will. Excuse me, one moment. I will summon Madame Fosco, to keep you from feeling dull."

Knowing as well as he did, that he was summoning Madame Fosco, to ensure my not leaving the house while he was asleep, I made no reply, and occupied myself in tying up the papers which he had placed in my possession.

The lady came in, cool, pale, and venomous as ever. "Amuse Mr. Hartright, my angel," said the Count. He placed a chair for her, kissed her hand for the second time, withdrew to a sofa, and, in three minutes, was as peacefully and happily asleep as the most virtuous man in existence.

Madame Fosco took a book from the table, sat down, and looked at me, with the steady, vindictive malice of a woman who never forgot and never forgave.

"I have been listening to your conversation with my husband," she said. "If I had been in his place I would have laid you dead on the hearth-rug."

With those words, she opened her book; and never looked at me, or spoke to me, from that time till the time when her husband woke.

He opened his eyes and rose from the sofa, accurately to an hour from the time when he had gone to sleep.

"I feel infinitely refreshed," he remarked. "Eleanor, my good wife, are you all ready, upstairs? That is well. My little packing here can be completed in ten minutes—my travelling-dress assumed in ten minutes more. What remains, before the agent comes?" He looked about the room, and noticed the cage with his white mice in it. "Ah!" he cried, piteously;
"a last laceration of my sympathies still remains. My innocent pets! my little cherished children! what am I to do with them? For the present, we are settled nowhere; for the present, we travel incessantly—the less baggage we carry, the better for ourselves. My cockatoo, my canaries, and my little mice—who will cherish them, when their good Papa is gone?"

He walked about the room, deep in thought. He had not been at all troubled about writing his confession, but he was visibly perplexed and distressed about the far more important question of the disposal of his pets. After long consideration, he suddenly sat down again at the writing-table.

"An idea!" he exclaimed. "I will offer my canaries and my cockatoo to this vast Metropolis—my agent shall present them, in my name, to the Zoological Gardens of London. The Document that describes them shall be drawn out on the spot."

He began to write, repeating the words as they flowed from his pen.


The pen spluttered again; and the flourish was attached to his signature.

"Count! you have not included the mice," said Madame Fosco.

He left the table, took her hand, and placed it on his heart.

"All human resolution, Eleanor," he said, solemnly, "has its limits. My limits are inscribed on that Document. I cannot part with my white mice. Bear with me, my angel, and remove them to their travelling-cage, upstairs."

"Admirable tenderness!" said Madame Fosco, admiring her husband, with a last viperish look in my direction. She took up the cage carefully; and left the room.

The Count looked at his watch. In spite of his resolute assumption of composure, he was getting anxious for the agent's arrival. The candles had long since been extinguished; and the sunlight of the new morning poured into the room. It was not till five minutes past seven that the gate bell rang, and the agent made his appearance. He was a foreigner, with a dark beard.

"Mr. Hartrighth—Monsieur Rubelle," said the Count, introducing us. He took the agent (a foreign spy, in every line of his face, if ever there was one yet) into a corner of the room; whispered some directions to him; and then left us together. "Monsieur Rubelle," as soon as we were alone, suggested, with great politeness, that I should favour him with his instructions. I wrote two lines to Pesca, authorising him to deliver my sealed letter "to the Bearer;" directed the note; and handed it to Monsieur Rubelle.

The agent waited with me till his employer returned, equipped in travelling costume. The Count examined the address of my letter before he dismissed the agent. "I thought so!" he said, turning on me, with a dark look, and altering again in his manner from that moment.

He completed his packing; and then sat consulting a travelling map, making entries in his pocket-book, and looking, every now and then, impatiently at his watch. Not another word, addressed to myself, passed his lips. The near approach of the hour for his departure, and the proof he had seen of the communication established between Pesca and myself, had plainly recalled his whole attention to the measures that were necessary for securing his escape.

A little before eight o'clock, Monsieur Rubelle came back with my unopened letter in his hand. The Count looked carefully at the superscription and the seal—lit a candle—and burnt the letter. "I perform my promise," he said; "but this matter, Mr. Hartright, shall not end here."
The agent had kept at the door the cab in which he had returned. He and the maid-servant now busied themselves in removing the luggage. Madame Fosco came downstairs, thickly veiled, with the travelling-cage of the white mice in her hand. She neither spoke to me, nor looked towards me. Her husband escorted her to the cab. "Follow me, as far as the passage," he whispered in my ear; "I may want to speak to you at the last moment."

I went out to the door; the agent standing below me in the front garden. The Count came back alone, and drew me a few steps inside the passage.

"Remember the Third condition!" he whispered. "You shall hear from me, Mr. Hartright—I may claim from you the satisfaction of a gentleman sooner than you think for." He caught my hand, before I was aware of him, and wrung it hard—then turned to the door, stopped, and came back to me again.

"One word more," he said, confidentially. "When I last saw Miss Halcombe, she looked thin and ill. I am anxious about that admirable woman. Take care of her, sir! With my hand on my heart, I solemnly implore you—take care of Miss Halcombe!"

Those were the last words he said to me, before he squeezed his huge body into the cab, and drove off.

The agent and I waited at the door a few moments, looking after him. While we were standing together, a second cab appeared from a turning a little way down the road. It followed the direction previously taken by the Count's cab; and, as it passed, the house and the open garden gate, a person inside looked at us out of the window. The stranger at the Opera again!—the light-haired foreigner with the scar on his left cheek!

"You wait here with me, sir, for half an hour more?" said Monsieur Rubelle.

"I do."

We returned to the sitting-room. I was in no humour to speak to the agent, or to allow him to speak to me. I took out the papers which the Count had placed in my hands; and read the terrible story of the conspiracy told by the man who had planned and perpetrated it.

IN pursuance of the plan announced at the commencement of THE WOMAN IN WHITE, we have the pleasure of presenting to the reader a New Story by CHARLES LEVER. After the completion of The Woman in White next week, A DAY'S RIDE: A LIFE'S ROMANCE, will occupy its place on the first page of each weekly number, and will be continued from week to week until finished.

{Page 441 in the original}
**Article:** ‘The Woman in White [xxxix]’ by Wilkie Collins

**Journal:** *All the Year Round*, Volume III, Magazine No. 69, 18 August 1860, Pages: 433-441

**Author(s):**
*Wilkie Collins*

Novelist. Attended a private school in Highbury. Admitted at Lincoln’s Inn, 1846; called to the bar, 1851; interest lay in writing, rather than in law. First signed story appeared in *Douglas Jerrold’s Illuminated Magazine*, 1843; later contributed to *Bentley’s Miscellany*, *Cornhill*, *Cassell’s*, *Temple Bar*, *Belgravia*, *Canadian Monthly*, and other periodicals. In 1848 published memoir of his father, William Collins the artist; in 1850, *Antonina*, the first of his some thirty works of fiction. Achieved fame as writer of sensation and detective novels; turned to writing propaganda novels; wrote also plays.

Collins met Dickens in 1851 and became, stated Forster, for all the rest of the life of Dickens, one of his dearest and most valued friends" (Life, Book VI, sect. vi). Collins came to share in many of Dickens’s activities. He took part in theatricals, which included presentations of his plays *The Lighthouse* (in 1855) and *The Frozen Deep* (in 1857). He was Dickens’s companion for convivial evenings, as well as for holiday excursions at home and on the Continent. He was a frequent guest at Dickens’s home.

In their literary association, the two writers collaborated on stories and plays; they consulted each other about their writings, Dickens frequently giving Collins helpful advice and criticism. Most critics agree that each influenced the writing of the other, though some contend that Dickens’s writing was not influenced by Collins’s. Collins held a high opinion of some of Dickens’s novels; others he thought badly written. A Tale of Two Cities he mentioned in his preface to *The Woman in White as the most perfect work of constructive art that has ever proceeded from [Dickens's] pen"*. Marginalia in his copy of Forster's Life record his opinion that Martin Chuzzlewit was in some respects Dickens’s finest novel, Barnaby Rudge his weakest; that Oliver Twist, though badly constructed, was admirable for its character of Nancy; and that the latter half of Dombey "no intelligent person can have read without astonishment at the badness of it" (Robinson, Wilkie Collins, p. 258). Collins dedicated *Hide and Seek*, 1854, to Dickens as a token of admiration and affection". Dickens thought it a very remarkable book", "in some respects masterly" (to Georgina Hogarth, July 22, 1854). He had similar high praise for other of Collins's novels. The literary kinship that Dickens felt with Collins, as also his affection for him, appears in a letter of October 14 1862. Having learned that Collins, while working on *No Name*, had become seriously ill, Dickens offered to take over the writing at any moment that Collins might ask him to: "Absurdly unnecessary to say that it would be a (makeshift! But I could do it at a pinch, so like you as that no one should find out the difference". Certain of Dickens's friends found the close friendship and literary association of the two men difficult to explain, seeing in it a kind of degradation of Dickens to the level of a man whom they considered his inferior. (Some commentators on Dickens have held the same attitude.)
Sala, after Dickens's death, expressed the hope that either Forster or Collins (would write the authorized biography of Dickens. Both writers, he stated, "had opportunities of studying and of judging: the personal character of Charles Dickens—opportunities possessed by none other of his contemporaries" (Charles Dickens, p. 95). Collins began to contribute to H.W. the year after he had become acquainted with Dickens. Dickens valued him highly as a writer for that periodical and for its successor; various of his letters mention Collins's industry, his dependability, his capacity for taking pains. And Dickens was eager to retain Collins as a H.W. contributor as Collins's reputation, in time, brought him offers from other periodicals. In a letter to Wills, April 1 1856, Dickens instructed him to pay Collins fifty pounds for "A Rogue's Life", explaining: "I think it [the payment] right, abstractedly, in the case of a careful and good writer on whom we can depend for Xmas Nos. and the like. But further, I know of offers for stories going about—to Collins himself for instance—which make it additionally desirable that we should not shave close in such a case". The letter implies that Dickens considered the amount a generous payment; actually, it was a few shillings less than the standard rate of a guinea a page. After Collins had been a H.W. contributor for four and a half years, Dickens induced him to join the editorial staff. His salary was to be five guineas a week. The offer was not, as Collins saw, a very advantageous one to him; he accepted it only on the agreement that a novel by him be serialized in H.W., with his authorship announced. The Dead Secret was so announced, first on December 6 1856 (in the Christmas number "The Wreck of the Golden Mary"). After October 25 of that year the Office Book records no further payment to Collins for individual items. Toward the end of 1857, Dickens increased Collins's salary by an "extra Fifty" per year. "... I have no doubt of his being devoted to H.W., and doing great service", he wrote to Wills, October 2. Collins's principal work as staff member was to write original material for the periodical, sometimes—as in "Highly Proper!"—articles on subjects suggested by Dickens. What his other duties were the Dickens-Wills correspondence does not specify. The fact that the Office Book does not list his name jointly with the names of outside contributors implies that revising contributed material was probably not part of his work. "Highly Proper!", dealing with social prejudice in private schools, is assigned in the Office Book to Collins alone. It was probably revised by Wills, in accordance with Dickens's instructions to him (September 24 1858) that there be left in it nothing that might be "unnecessarily offensive to the middle class"; Collins, Dickens remarked, always had "a tendency to overdo that". The two articles published in 1858 to which Dickens's initials are attached jointly with Collins's name—"A Clause for the New Reform Bill" and "Doctor Dulcamara"—were not actual collaborations of the two writers; the articles were written by Collins and revised or added to by Dickens (see Stone, ed., Charles Dickens' Uncollected Writings from Household Words). "The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices", however, was an actual collaboration of Dickens and Collins; each narrated a part of their uneventful "tour", and each contributed a story to the account. Certain of the Christmas numbers were also collaborations of Dickens and Collins. The original idea of "The Perils of Certain English Prisoners" was Collins's; Collins wrote the second chapter of the story, Dickens writing the first and third. "Each revised the work of the other" (Robinson, p. 118). For "The Wreck of the Golden Mary" and "A House to Let" Dickens devised the framework. In the working out of his idea, in the actual writing of the framework, and in fitting it into the stories that form a part of the numbers, Collins was his close collaborator, as Dickens's letters make clear. (Of these two Christmas numbers, as also of the 1854 and
1855 Christmas numbers, certain sections that the Office Book assigns to Collins alone are reprinted by Stone, in Charles Dickens' Uncollected Writings, as in part by Dickens). Among Collins's H.W. stories for which Dickens had high praise were "Sister Rose" and "The Diary of Anne Rodway". "The Diary" moved him to tears. Among Collins's non-fiction items that Dickens particularly liked were "The Cruise of the Tomtit", "To Think, or Be Thought For?", "A Petition to the Novel Writers" and "The Unknown Public".

At least two of Collins's H.W. contributions brought a remonstrance to the editorial staff: Harriet Martineau, in her indignant letter to Wills, cited "The Yellow Mask" (which she had not herself read) as an instance of H.W.'s vicious anti-Catholic policy that in part motivated her determination no longer to write for H.W. (Autobiography, II, 94-95); and a son of the theatrical manager Robert William Elliston wrote to Dickens in protest against the epithets that Collins, in his article "Douglas Jerrold" had applied to Elliston (My Miscellanies, II, 85-86n). The articles "To Think, or Be Thought For?" and "Dramatic Grub Street", stated Collins, provoked "some remonstrance both of the public and the private sort" (My Miscellanies, II, 193n). A complimentary reference to Collins appeared in H.W. the month before he became a contributor. In "If This Should Meet His Eye," Dixon mentioned him and "his pleasant book" on Cornwall—i.e., Rambles beyond Railways. Later, in addition to the announcement of Collins's authorship of The Dead Secret, there appeared thirteen advertisements for the novel "By WILKIE COLLINS" as a 2-volume Bradbury & Evans publication. (A Child's History of England and Hard Times were the only other books so advertised in H.W.). On the cessation of H.W., Collins served for a time on the staff of A.Y.R. Some years later he assisted Wills for a time in editorial work during Dickens's American reading tour. Collins wrote for A.Y.R., aside from short items, The Woman in White, No Name, and The Moonstone. Dickens had high praise for the first two novels and also, on his reading its opening chapters, for The Moonstone. It was undoubtedly an estrangement between him and Collins (see Charles Collins) that prompted Dickens's later comment that the construction of The Moonstone was "wearisome beyond endurance" and that the "vein of obstinate conceit" in the novel made enemies of its readers (to Wills, July 26 1868). Actually, according to Tinsley (Random Recollections, I, 114-15), both The Woman in White and The Moonstone did much to increase the circulation of A.Y.R. Collins contributed an occasional item to A.Y.R. under the editorship of Charles Dickens, Jr. Of the items listed below as not reprinted, one of those that appeared in H.W. after Collins's brother had begun to write for the periodical is assigned in the Office Book merely to "Collins" and is not referred to in Dickens's letters as by Wilkie Collins. This is "A Sermon for Sepoys". The fact that no payment is recorded for the item indicates that it is by Wilkie Collins and not by his brother. Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature attributes the item to Wilkie Collins. "A Column to Burns" also listed below among items not reprinted, is not included in the Office Book. It consists of a letter from a H.W. reader in Glasgow, introduced by a paragraph of editorial comment. The motivation for the letter was Collins's article on Burns in a preceding number. Since Collins was on the staff, it is logical to assume that correspondence concerning his own article should have been referred to him and that he should have written the editorial comment prefaced to the Glasgow letter. Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature attributes the item to him. Harper's reprinted "A Terribly Strange Bed" without acknowledgment to H.W.; it reprinted "The Fourth Poor Traveller" as "A Lawyer's Story. By Charles Dickens." According to the Dickensian (June 1916, pp. 143-
44), a Philadelphia publisher reprinted "Sister Rose", probably in the year of its publication in H.W., as a work by Dickens.

Author: Anne Lohrli; © University of Toronto Press, 1973.

Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

The Wilkie Collins Pages

Genre(s):

- Prose: Serial Fiction
  
  Fictional narrative 'published in successive instalments' (OED) of a periodical, i.e. involving publication in anything more than a single instalment.

- Prose: Leading Article
  
  The article published first in any given magazine issue, below the masthead.

Subject(s):

- Crime; Criminals; Punishment; Capital Punishment; Prisons; Penal Transportation; Penal Colonies

- Fraud; Forgery; Deception; Betrayal—Fiction

- London (England)—Description and Travel

Citation (MHRA):  Collins, Wilkie, 'The Woman in White [xxxix]', All the Year Round, III, 18 August 1860, 433-441

N.B.  The layout of prose articles exported to PDF follows the two-column format of the original, but does NOT preserve the original line breaks. The layout of poems exported to PDF follows the original line breaks, but does NOT attempt to replicate the original indentation or stanza structure. For all these features please refer to the facsimile pages on DJO.