

Penguin



Readers

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THE WOMAN IN WHITE

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CHAPTER ONE

How the story began, by Walter Hartright

I want to tell you a story that was never heard in a court of law, but it should have been. As the judge might once have heard it, you shall hear it now. Sometimes, I will tell the story. At other times, the story will be told in the words of others who knew more than me about what happened.

I will now begin. My name is Walter Hartright, and I am twenty-eight years old. I work as a teacher of drawing.

It was the last day of July, and the long, hot summer was coming to an end. I was visiting my mother and sister at their house in Hampstead, just north of London, and a good friend of mine, Professor Pesca, had joined me there.

I want to formally introduce Pesca to you because he is the starting point of this strange story. He is an Italian teacher of languages, and I first met him when we were teaching the same rich family in London. All I knew about him at that time was that he had once worked at the University of Padua, but that he had since left Italy for political reasons. Soon after that first meeting, I saved him from drowning in an accident at the seaside, and he has always been extremely grateful for this. If that accident had not happened, I doubt that we would have become such good friends. And I am sure that I would never

have met, through him, the woman who has filled my thoughts and has become the centre of my life.

During the conversation at my mother's house, Pesca began to speak excitedly.

"I have something to tell you! When you saved my life, dear friend, I said that I would never be happy again until I had found the chance to do something good for you. Well, that moment has come! There is a rich family that is looking for a drawing teacher. I have given them your name and told them that you are perfect for the job!" He then handed me a letter that detailed the work. The letter said that Mr Frederick Fairlie of Limmeridge House, Cumberland, wanted to employ a teacher of drawing. This teacher would live at the house with the family, be paid very well, and teach the two young Fairlie ladies to paint and draw.

I needed money, and the job certainly sounded very interesting. In less than a week it had been decided – I was going to work for Mr Fairlie. On my last evening in London, I visited my mother and sister, who were delighted by my news, but of course they were also very sad that I was leaving the city.

It was nearly midnight when I left their house and began the long walk back to my small London apartment. I was deep in thought and wondering what the two young Fairlie women would be like when I felt someone put their hand lightly on my shoulder. A cold feeling ran through me, and I turned around immediately. There was a young woman standing before me. She was dressed completely in white and looked very serious.

"Is this the road to London?" she said.

I looked at this strange woman carefully. Her face was very pale, and she seemed sad and quite **anxious**. I noticed that she was holding a small bag.

“Yes, it is,” I replied at last. “I’m sorry; I was shocked by your sudden appearance in the road.”

“You looked like a good man, so I stepped out from where I was hiding to ask for your help. I am **desperate**. Can I trust you?”

“Yes,” I told her. “Tell me how I can help you, and if I can, then I will.”

“Thank you so much,” she said. “I do not know London, but I have a friend in the city who I can stay with. Will you help me to hire a carriage?”

I told her that we should walk towards London together and that I would help her get a carriage on the way. As we walked, I noticed that she kept looking anxiously around her, as though she was terrified that someone would see her.

“Do you know many important people in London?” she asked, nervously.

“Yes, some,” I replied. She stopped walking and looked directly into my eyes.

“Do you know any **baronets**?”

“Why do you ask?” I said.

“Because I know one that’s terrible. But I cannot tell you his name!”

I told her the names of the baronets I did know, and she seemed pleased that she did not recognize any of them. It was several minutes before she spoke again. “Do you live in London?”

“Yes,” I answered. “But tomorrow I am leaving London for a while and going to the country.”

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“To Cumberland.”

“Oh! How I wish I was going there, too! I was once happy in Cumberland,” she said. “I was born in the south, in Hampshire, but I went to school for a while up there. I would love to see Limmeridge village and Limmeridge House again.”

I immediately stopped walking, and I repeated her words. “Limmeridge House?”

“Yes. Why are you so surprised?”

“Someone mentioned that house to me just a few days ago. What a **coincidence!**” I said.

“Really? Well, I don’t know the people who own it now. It was Mrs Fairlie that I knew and loved. She was such a special person. But she is dead, and so is her husband . . .”

I would have asked her more questions, but at that moment a horse and carriage drove past us.

“Oh!” the woman cried. “I really must get that carriage!”

I called to the driver of the carriage and helped her to climb inside. She reached out and touched me; her small, cold hand rested on mine for a moment, and she thanked me for my help. The carriage then moved forward, and the woman in white was gone.

I continued to walk on my way, but I was worried. Who was this woman? Would she be safe? Should I have travelled with her? Suddenly I heard a carriage approaching from behind me. As

the carriage stopped, I saw that there was a policeman walking along on the opposite side of the road. A man inside the carriage called out to the policeman.

“Excuse me!” the man shouted. “Have you seen a woman pass this way?”

“What does she look like?” the policeman asked.

“She was dressed all in white.”

“No, I haven’t seen her, sir,” the officer replied.

“If you or any of your men see her, please take her to this address,” said the man, and he bent down from the carriage and gave the policeman a piece of paper.

“Why, sir?” asked the policeman. “What has she done?”

“She has escaped from an **asylum**! So don’t forget: a woman in white,” said the man. Then the carriage moved on.

Escaped from an asylum! When I heard those words I was filled with horror and regret. I thought again about everything that had taken place that night. But no, I had seen nothing to make me think that the woman was suffering from mental-health problems. In fact, she had seemed very clear-minded.

I was so worried that I could not sleep that night. Had the poor woman come to any harm? Where in London had she been travelling to? Had she been found by the man in the carriage? What could, or should, I have done differently?

At last the sun began to rise, and the time came for me to leave London. By mid-morning I was heading for Cumberland. However, there were problems with the trains, and, after a long and difficult journey, it was nearly midnight when I reached Limmeridge House. The family had already gone to bed. After

eating the dinner that had been left out for me, I was taken through the darkened house to my room by the **housekeeper**.

As I prepared myself for bed, and the new life that I would begin in the morning, I wondered what I would see in my dreams that night. Would it be the woman in white? Or would I dream about my future at Limmeridge House?

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