

THE WOMAN IN WHITE

By Wilkie Collins

An adaptation for advanced level learners of English by Richard Lewis

CHAPTER ONE

A Meeting By Moonlight

It was the last day of July. The long hot summer was coming to an end, and I was feeling ill and depressed. I was also short of money, so I had little chance of escaping from the dusty London streets, and would have to spend the autumn economically between my rooms in the city and my mother's house.

My mother and my sister, Sarah, lived in a cottage in Hampstead, in the northern suburbs, and I usually went to see them twice a week. This evening I arrived at the gate of the cottage just as it was starting to get dark. I had hardly rung the bell before the door was opened violently, and my Italian friend, Professor Pesca, rushed out to greet me.

Pesca was a language teacher who had left Italy for political reasons and had made his home in England. He was a strange, excitable little man, who was always trying to be more English than the English. I had met him from time to time when he was teaching in the same houses as I was, and then one day I met him by chance in Brighton. We agreed to go for a swim together in the sea. He was very enthusiastic and it never for a moment occurred to me that he did not know how to swim! Fortunately, when he suddenly sank to the bottom, I was able to dive down and save him. From that day on he was my grateful friend, and that evening he showed his gratitude to me in a way that changed my whole life.

'Now, my good friend,' he said, when we were all in my mother's sitting-room. 'I have some wonderful news for you. I have been asked by my employer to recommend a drawing teacher for a post with a rich family in the north of England. And who do you think I have recommended? The best drawing teacher in the world – Mr Walter Hartright!'

'My dear Pesca! How good you are to Walter!' exclaimed my mother. 'How kind, how generous you are!'

As for myself, although I was certainly grateful for his kindness, I still felt strangely depressed. I thanked him warmly, however, and asked to see the conditions. The note he gave me said that a qualified drawing teacher was wanted by Mr Frederick Fairlie of Limmeridge House, Cumberland, to teach his two young nieces for a period of at least four months. The teacher was to live at Limmeridge House as a gentleman and receive four pounds a week. Letters to show he was of good character would be required.

The position was certainly an attractive one, and I could not understand why I felt so little enthusiasm for it. However, since my mother and sister thought it was a great opportunity, and I had no wish to hurt Pesca's feelings, I agreed to apply for the job.

The next morning I sent my letters of recommendation to the Professor's employer, and four days later I heard that Mr Fairlie accepted my services and requested me to start for Cumberland immediately. I arranged to leave the next day, and in the evening I walked to Hampstead to say goodbye to my mother and Sarah.

When I left them at midnight, a full moon was shining in a dark blue, starless sky, and the air was soft and warm. I decided to take the long route home, and walk across Hampstead Heath before joining the road into the centre of the city. After a while I came to a crossroads and turned onto the London road. I was lost in my own thoughts, wondering about the two young ladies in Cumberland, when suddenly, my heart seemed to stop beating. A hand had touched my shoulder from behind.