

# The Fairfield News and Herald.

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## THE BLACK ROBE.

BY WILKIE COLLINS.

—AUTHOR OF—  
"THE WOMAN IN WHITE," "THE MOON STONE," "AFTER DARE," "NO NAME," "MAN AND WIFE," "THE LAW AND THE DAUGHTER," "THE NEW MAGDALEN," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER IV.

There was not a sound in the room. Romayne stood looking at the priest.

"Did you hear what I said?" Father Benwell asked.

"Yes," he answered, "I really mean what I said."

He made no reply—he waited, like a man expecting to hear more.

Father Benwell was alive to the vast importance at such a moment of not shrinking from the responsibility which he had assumed.

"I see how I distress you," he said; "but for your sake I am bound to speak out."

"The woman whom I have married is the wife of another man!"

He slowly repeated the words to himself and then looked at Father Benwell. "Who is the man?" he asked.

"I introduced you to him when I was ignorant of the circumstances as you are," the priest answered. "The man is Mr. Bernard Winterfield."

Romayne half-raised himself from the chair. A momentary anger glittered in his eyes and faded out again, extinguished by the nobler emotions of grief and shame. He remembered Winterfield's introduction to Stella.

"Her husband!" he said, speaking again to himself. "And she led me to introduce him to her. And she received him as a stranger. He paused and thought of it. "The proofs, if you please, sir," he resumed, with sudden humility. "I don't want to hear any particulars. It will be enough for me if I know beyond all doubt that I have been deceived and disgraced."

Father Benwell unlocked his desk and placed two papers before Romayne. He did his duty with a grave indifference to all minor considerations. The time had not yet come for expressions of sympathy and regret.

"The first paper," he said, "is a certified copy of the register of the marriage of Miss Eyrecount to Mr. Winterfield, celebrated (as you will see) by the English chaplain at Brussels, and witnessed by three persons. Look at the names."

The bride's mother, was the first witness. The two names that followed were the names of Lord and Lady Loring. "They, too, in the conspiracy to deceive me?" Romayne said, as he laid the paper back on the table.

"I obtained that piece of written evidence," Father Benwell proceeded, "by the help of a reverend colleague of mine residing at Brussels. I will give you his name and address if you wish to make further inquiries."

"Quite needless. What is this other paper?"

"This other paper is an extract from the shorthand writer's notes (suppressed in the reports of the public journals) of proceedings in an English court of law obtained at my request by my lawyer in London."

"What have I to do with it?"

He put the question in a tone of passive endurance—resolved to the severest moral martyrdom that could be inflicted on him.

"I will answer you in two words," said Father Benwell. "In justice to Miss Eyrecount, I am bound to produce her excuse for marrying you."

Romayne looked at him in stern amazement.

"Excuse!" he repeated.

"Yes—excuse. The proceedings to which I have alluded declare Miss Eyrecount's marriage to be null and void by the English law—in consequence of his having been married at the time to another woman. Try to follow me. I will put it as briefly as possible. In justice to yourself and to your future career you must understand this revolting case thoroughly from beginning to end."

With those prefatory words he told the story of Winterfield's first marriage, altering nothing, concealing nothing, doing the fullest justice to Winterfield's innocence of all evil motive from first to last.

"You were mortified and I was surprised," he went on, "when Mr. Winterfield dropped his acquaintance with you. We now know that he netted like an honorable man."

He waited to see what effect he had produced. Romayne was in no state of mind to do justice to Winterfield or to any one. His pride was mortally wounded, his high sense of honor and delicacy writhed under the outrage inflicted on it.

"And mind this," Father Benwell persisted, "poor human nature has its right to be as justly concealed in the way of excuse and allowance. Miss Eyrecount would naturally be advised by her friends, would naturally be eager on her own part, to keep hidden from you what happened at Brussels. A sensitive woman, placed in a position so horribly false and degrading, even she does not so severely judge, even when she does wrong. I am bound to say this and more. Speaking from my own knowledge of all the parties I have no doubt that Miss Eyrecount and Mr. Winterfield did really part at the church door."

Romayne answered by a look so indistinguishable of the most impossible unbelief that it absolutely justified the bad advice by which Stella's worldly-wise friends had encouraged her to conceal the truth. Father Benwell prudently closed his lips. He had

put the case with perfect fairness; his bitterest enemy could not have denied that.

Romayne took up the second paper, looked at it and threw it back again on the table with an expression of disgust.

"You told me just now," he said, "that I was married to the wife of another man, and there is the judge's decision releasing Miss Eyrecount from her marriage to Mr. Winterfield. May I ask you to explain yourself?"

"Certainly! Let me first remind you that you owe religious allegiance to the principles which the church has asserted for centuries past, with all the authority of its divine institution. You admit that?"

"I admit it."

"Now, listen. In our church, Romayne, marriage is even more than a religious institution—it is a sacrament. We acknowledge no human laws which profess that sacrament. Take two examples of what I say. When the great Napoleon was at the height of his power the Seventh refused to acknowledge the validity of the emperor's second marriage to Maria Louise while Josephine was living, divorced by the emperor. Again, in the church of the

royalty, the marriage of Mrs. Fitzherbert to George the Fourth, and still declares, in justice to her memory, that she was the king's lawful wife. In one word, marriage is only to be dissolved by death. You remember what I told you of Mr. Winterfield?"

"Yes, his first marriage took place before the registrar."

"In plain English, Romayne, Mr. Winterfield and the woman rider in the circus pronounced a formula of words before a layman in an office. This is not only no marriage; it is a blasphemous profanation of a holy rite. Acts of parliament which sanction such proceedings are acts of infidelity. The church declares it in defense of religion."

"I understand you," said Romayne. "Mr. Winterfield's marriage at Brussels—"

"Which the English law," Father Benwell interposed, "declares to be annulled by the marriage before the registrar stands good, nevertheless, by the higher law of the church. Mr. Winterfield is Miss Eyrecount's husband as long as they both live. An ordained priest performed the ceremony in a consecrated building, and Protestant marriages, so celebrated, are marriages acknowledged by the Catholic church. Under those circumstances the ceremony which afterward united you to Miss Eyrecount—though neither you nor the clergyman were to blame—was a mere mockery. Need I say more? Shall I leave you for a while by yourself?"

"No! I don't know what I may think, I don't know what I may do, if you leave me by myself."

Father Benwell took a chair by Romayne's side. "It has been my hard duty to grieve and humiliate you," he said. "Do you bear me no ill will?" He held out his hand.

Romayne took it as an act of justice if not as an act of gratitude.

"Can I be of any use in advising you?" Father Benwell asked.

"Who can advise me in my position?" Romayne rejoined.

"I can at least tell you that you should take time to think over your position."

"Time—take time? You talk as if my situation was endurable."

"Everything is endurable, Romayne."

"It may be so to you, Father Benwell. Did you part with your humanity when you put on the black robe of the priest?"

"I parted, my son, with those weaknesses of our humanity on which women preponderate. You talk of your position. I will put it before you at its worst."

"For what purpose?"

"To show you exactly what your position is. Judged by the law of England Mrs. Romayne is your wife. Judged by the principles held sacred among the religious community to which you belong she is not Mrs. Romayne—she is Miss Winterfield—living with you in adultery. If you regret your conversion—"

"I don't regret it, Father Benwell."

"If you renounce the holy aspirations which you have yourself acknowledged to me, return to your domestic life. But don't ask me, while you are living with that lady, to acknowledge you as a member of our community."

Romayne was silent. More violent emotions aroused in his mind, with time, subsided into calmness, and mercy, past affection found its opportunity, and pleaded with him. The priest's bold language had missed the object at which it aimed. It had revived in Romayne's memory the image of Stella in the days when he had first seen her. How gently her influence had wrought on him for good; how tenderly how truly she had loved him.

"Give me some more wine!" he cried. "I feel faint and giddy." Don't despise me, Father Benwell; I was once so fond of her!"

The priest poured out the wine.

"I feel for you," he said. "Indeed, indeed I feel for you."

"Let me mention one circumstance," Father Benwell proceeded, "which may help to relieve you for the moment. In your present state of mind you cannot return to the Retreat."

"Impossible!"

"I have had a room prepared for you in this house. Here, free from any disturbing influence, you can shape the future course of your life. If you wish to communicate with your residence at Higglite—"

"Don't speak of it!"

Father Benwell sighed.

"Ah, I understand!" he said, sadly. "The house associated with Mr. Winterfield's visit is—"

Romayne interrupted him, this time by gesture only. The hand that had made the sign clinched itself when it rested afterward on the table. His eyes looked downward under frowning brows. At the name of Winterfield's name, as though he had been poisoned every fiber

of London. Have I really made any impression on the heart of the beautiful Stella? In my miserable position—ignorant whether I am free or not—I have shrunk from formally acknowledging that I love her.

"I am becoming superstitious!" In the obituary of to-day's *Times* the death is recorded of that unhappy woman whom I was mad enough to marry. After hearing nothing of her for seven years I am free! Surely this is a good omen! Shall I follow the Eyrecounts to London and leave myself? I have not confidence enough in my own power of attraction to run the risk. Better to write first, in strictest confidence, to Mrs. Eyrecount.

"14th.—An enchanting answer from my angel's mother, written in great haste. They are on the point of leaving for Paris. Stella is restless and dissatisfied; she wants change of scene; and Mrs. Eyrecount adds, in so many words: 'It is you who have upset her; why did you not speak while we were at Beaupark?' I am to hear again from Paris. Good old Father Newbiss said all along that she was fond of me, and wondered, like Mrs. Eyrecount, why I failed to declare myself. How could I tell them of the hideous fetters which bound me in those days?"

18th, Paris.—She has accepted me! Words are useless to express my happiness.

19th.—A letter from my lawyer full of professional subtleties and delays. I have no patience to enumerate them. We move to Belgium to-morrow. Not on our way back to England; Stella is so little desirous of leaving the continent that we are likely to be married abroad. But she is weary of the perpetual gayety and glitter of Paris, and wants to see the old Belgium cities. Her mother leaves Paris with regret. The liveliest woman of her age that I ever met with.

27th May, Brussels.—My blessing on the old Belgian cities. Mrs. Eyrecount is so eager to get away from them that she books me in hurrying the marriage, and even consents, solely against the grain, to let the wedding be celebrated at Brussels in a private and unpretending way. She has only stipulated that Lord and Lady Loring (old friends) are to be present. They are to arrive to-morrow, and two days afterward we are to be married.

(An inclosure is inserted in this place. It consists of the death bed confessions of Winterfield's first wife and of the explanatory letter written by the rector of Belhaven. The circumstances related in these documents, already known to the reader, are left to speak for themselves, and the Extracts from the Diary are then continued.)

18th May, Dingen-on-the-Rhine.—Let us be honest with each other, which is a small degree. The frightful mistake at Brussels will at least be kept secret, so far as I am concerned. Beaupark house is shut up and the servants are dismissed, "in consequence of my residence abroad." To Father Newbiss I have privately written, telling him that the marriage is broken off; he writes back (good old man!) a kind and comforting letter. It all seems safe so far. Time will, I suppose, help me to bear my sad lot. And perhaps a day may come when Stella and her friends will know how cruelly they have wronged me.

"Women often exaggerate their troubles," she said. "It is perhaps an unfair trial of your patience, but I should like you to satisfy yourself that I have not made the worst of my situation. That letter will place it before you in Mr. Romayne's own words. Read it, except where the page is turned down."

It was her husband's letter of farewell.

The language was scrupulously delicate and considerate. But to my mind it entirely failed to disguise the fanatical cruelty of the man's resolution addressed to his wife. In substance it came to this:

"He had discovered the marriage at Brussels, which she had deliberately concealed from him when he took her for his wife. She had afterward persisted in that concealment, under circumstances which made it impossible that he could ever trust her again."

"Come, come!" I said, "you mustn't make Father jealous."

She let me raise her. Ah, if she could have kissed me—but that was not to be done; she kissed the dog's head, and then she spoke to me. I shall not set down what she said in these pages. While I live there is no fear of my forgetting those words.

She ad her back to her chair. The letter addressed to me by the rector of Belhaven still lay on the table unread. It was of some importance to Stella's complete enlightenment as containing evidence that the confession was genuine. But I hesitated for her sake to speak of it just yet.

"Now you know that you have a friend to help and advise you," I began.

"No," she interposed; "more than a friend, say a brother."

I said it. "You had something to ask of me," I resumed, "and you never put the question."

She understood me. "I meant to tell you," she said, "that I had written a letter of refusal to Mr. Romayne's lawyer. I have left Ten Acres never to return, and I refuse to accept a farthing of Mr. Romayne's money. My mother—though she knows we have enough to live on—tells me I have acted with incredible pride and folly. I wanted to ask if you blame me, Bernard, as she does?"

I dare say I was increasingly proud and foolish, too. It was the first time she had called me by my Christian name since the happy bygone time, never to come again. Under whatever influence I acted I respected and admired her for that refusal, and I owned it in so many words. This little encouragement seemed to relieve her. She was so much calmer that I ventured to speak of the rector's letter.

She wouldn't hear of it. "Oh, Bernard, have I not learnt to trust you yet? Put away these papers. There is only one thing I want to know. Who gave them to you?" The rector?

"No."

"How did they reach you?"

"Through Father Benwell."

She started to her feet like a woman electrified.

"I knew it!" she cried. "It is the priest who has wrecked my married life, and he got his information from those letters before he put them into your hands." That was the first and foremost of the questions I wanted to put to her, she said. "I am answered. I ask no more."

She was surely wrong about Father Benwell! I tried to show her why.

I told her that my reverend friend had put the letters into my hand with the seal which protected them unbroken. She laughed disdainfully. Did I know him so little as to doubt for a moment that he could break a seal and read the contents? This view was entirely new to me; I was startled, but not convinced. I never desert my friends—even when they are friends of no very

long standing—and I still tried to defend Father Benwell. The only result was to make her alter her intention of asking me no more questions. I innocently roused in her a new curiosity. She was eager to know how I had first become acquainted with the priest, and how he had contrived to possess himself of information which was intended for my reading only.

There was but one way of answering her.

It was far from easy to a man like myself, unaccustomed to state circumstances in their proper order, but I had no other choice than to reply by telling the long story of the theft and discovery of the rector's papers. So far as Father Benwell was concerned the narrative only confirmed her suspicions. For the rest, the circumstances which most interested her were the circumstances associated with the French boy.

"Anything connected with that poor creature?" she said, "has a dreadful interest for me now."

"Did you know him?" I asked, with some surprise.

"I knew him and his mother—you shall hear how at another time. I suppose I had a presentiment that the boy would have some evil influence over me. At any rate, when I accidentally touched him I trembled as if I had touched a serpent. You will think me superstitious; but, after what you have said, it is certainly true that he has been the indirect cause of the misfortune that has fallen on me. How came he to steal the papers? Did you ask the rector when you went to Belhaven?"

"I thought the rector nothing. But he asked it his duty to tell me that he knew of the theft."

She drew her chair nearer to me. "Let me hear every word of it!" she pleaded, eagerly.

I felt some reluctance to comply with the request.

"Is it not fit for me to hear?" she asked.

This forced me to plain with her. "If I repeat what the rector told me," I said, "I must speak of my wife."

She took my hand. "You have pitied and forgiven her," she answered. "Speak of her, Bernard, and don't, for God's sake, think that my heart is harder than yours."

I kissed the hand that she had given to me—even her "brother" might do that!

"It began," I said, "in the grateful attachment which the boy felt for my wife. He refused to leave her bedside on the day when she dictated her confession to the rector. As he was entirely ignorant of the English language, there seemed to be no objection to letting him have his own way. He became inquisitive as the writing went on. His questions annoyed the rector, and, as the easiest way of satisfying his curiosity, my wife told him that she was making her will. He knew just enough to what he had heard at various times, to associate making a will with gifts of money, and the pretended explanation silenced and satisfied him."

"Did the rector understand it, Stella asked."

"Yes. Like many other Englishmen in his position, although he was not ready at speaking French, he could read the language, and could fairly well understand it when it was spoken. After my wife's death he kindly placed the boy for a few days under the care of his housekeeper. Her early life had been passed in the island of Martinique; and she was able to communicate with the friendless foreigner in his own language. When he disappeared she was the only person who could throw any light on his motive for stealing the papers. On the day when he entered the house she caught him peeping through the keyhole of the study-door. He must have seen where the confession was placed, and the color of the old-fashioned blue paper on which it was written would help him to identify it. The next morning, during the rector's absence, he brought the manuscript to the housekeeper and asked her to translate it into French, so that he might know how much money was left to him in the will." She severely reproved him, made him replace the paper in the desk from which he had taken it, and threatened to tell the rector if his misconduct was repeated. He promised amendment, and the good-natured woman believed him. Two days afterward the locked door of the cabinet in which the papers had been secured was found open, and the boy and the boy were both missing together."

"Do you think he showed the confession to any other person?" Stella asked.

"I happened to know that he concealed it from his mother."

"After the housekeeper's reproach," I replied, "he would be cunning enough, in my opinion, not to run the risk of showing it to strangers. It is far more likely that he thought he might learn English enough to read it himself."

There the subject dropped. We were silent for a while. She was thinking and I was looking at her. On a sudden she raised her head. Her eyes rested on me gravely.

"It is very strange," she said.

"What is strange?"

"I have been thinking of the Loring's. They encouraged me to doubt you. They advised me to be silent about what happened at Brussels. And they, too, are concerned in my husband's desertion of me. He first met Father Benwell at their house. From that time I see the circumstances in my mind, all following one on another, until the priest and the French boy were brought together, and the miserable end came which has left me a deserted wife." Her head drooped again; her next words were murmured to herself. "I am still a young woman," she said, "Oh, God! what is my future to be?"

This morbid way of thinking distressed me. I reminded her that she had devoted friends.

"Not one," she answered, "but you."

"Have you not seen Lady Loring?" I asked.

"She and her husband have written most kindly, inviting me to make their home my home. I have no right to blame them, they meant well. But, after what has happened, I can't go back to them."

she made an effort to finish the sentence and gave it up, and called to the dog to come to her. The tears were in her eyes, and that was the way she took to hide them from me.

In general I am not quick at reading the minds of others, but I thought I understood Stella. Now that we are face to face the impulse to trust me had for the moment got the better of her caution and her pride; she was self-ashamed of it, half-inclined to follow it. I hesitated no longer. The time for which I had waited, the time to prove without any indelicacy on my side that I had never been unworthy of her, had surely come at last.

"Do you remember my reply to your letter about Father Benwell?" I asked.

"Yes, every word of it."

"I promised, if you ever had need of me, to prove that I had never been unworthy of your confidence. In your present situation I can honorably keep my promise. Shall I wait till you are calmer, or shall I go on at once?"

"When your mother and your friends took you from me," I resumed, "if you had shown any hesitation—"

She shuddered. The image of my unhappy wife, victoriously confronting us on the church steps, seemed to be recalled to her memory.

"Don't go back to it!" she cried.

"Spare me, I entreat you!"

I opened the writing-case in which I had kept the papers sent to me by the rector of Belhaven, and placed them on the table by which she was sitting. The more plainly and briefly I spoke now the better I thought it might be for both of us.

"Since we parted at Brussels," I said, "my wife has died. Here is a copy of the medical certificate of her death."

Stella refused to look at it.

"I don't understand such things," she answered, faintly. "What is this?" She took up my wife's death-bed confession.

"Read it," I said.

She looked frightened.

"What will it tell me?" she asked.

"It will tell you, Stella, that false appearances once led you into wronging an innocent man."

Having said this, I walked away to a window behind her, at the further end of the room, so that she might not see me while she read.

After a time—how much longer it seemed to be than it really was—I heard her move. As I turned from the window she ran to me, and fell on her knees at my feet. I tried to raise her; I entreated her to believe that she was forgiven. She seized my hands, and held them over her face—they were wet with her tears.

"I am ashamed to look at you," she said. "Oh, Bernard, what a wretch I have been!"

I never was so distressed in my life. I don't know what I should have said. What should have done, if my dear old dog had not helped me out of it. He, too, ran up to me with the loving jealousy of his race, and tried to lick my hands still fast in Stella's hold. His paws were on her shoulder; he attempted to push himself between us. I think I successfully assumed a tranquillity which I was far from really feeling.

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