

Literature.org:
[Authors](#)
[Contact](#)

[The Law and the Lady](#)

[Wilkie Collins](#)

Chapter 29 - In The Light

This Book:
[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

A LITTLE interval of solitude was a relief to me, as well as to Miserrimus Dexter.

Startling doubts beset me as I walked restlessly backward and forward, now in the anteroom, and now in the corridor outside. It was plain that I had (quite innocently) disturbed the repose of some formidable secrets in Miserrimus Dexter's mind. I confused and wearied my poor brains in trying to guess what the secrets might be. All my ingenuity--as after-events showed me--was wasted on speculations not one of which even approached the truth. I was on surer ground when I arrived at the conclusion that Dexter had really kept every mortal creature out of his confidence. He could never have betrayed such serious signs of disturbance as I had noticed in him, if he had publicly acknowledged at the Trial, or if he had privately communicated to any chosen friend, all that he knew of the tragic and terrible drama acted in the bedchamber at Gleninch. What powerful influence had induced him to close his lips? Had he been silent in mercy to others? or in dread of consequences to himself? Impossible to tell! Could I hope that he would confide to Me what he had kept secret from Justice and Friendship alike? When he knew what I really wanted of him, would he arm me, out of his own stores of knowledge, with the weapon that would win me victory in the struggle to come? The chances were against it--there was no denying that. Still the end was worth trying for. The caprice of the moment might yet stand my friend, with such a wayward being as Miserrimus Dexter. My plans and projects were sufficiently strange, sufficiently wide of the ordinary limits of a woman's thoughts and actions, to attract his sympathies. "Who knows," I thought to myself, "if I may not take his confidence by surprise, by simply telling him the truth?"

The interval expired; the door was thrown open; the voice of my host summoned me again to the inner room.

"Welcome back!" said Miserrimus Dexter.

"Dear Mrs. Valeria, I am quite myself again. How are you?"

He looked and spoke with the easy cordiality of an old friend. During the period of my absence, short as it was, another change had passed over this most multiform of living beings. His eyes sparkled with good-humor; his cheeks were flushing under a new excitement of some sort. Even his dress had undergone alteration since I had seen it last. He now wore an extemporized cap of white paper; his ruffles were tucked up; a clean apron was thrown over the sea-green coverlet. He hacked his chair before me, bowing and smiling, and waved me to a seat with the grace of a dancing master, chastened by the dignity of a lord in waiting.

"I am going to cook," he announced, with the most engaging simplicity. "We both stand in need of refreshment before we return to the serious business of our interview. You see me in my cook's dress; forgive it. There is a form in these things. I am a great stickler for forms. I have been taking some wine. Please sanction that proceeding by taking some wine too."

He filled a goblet of ancient Venetian glass with a purple-red liquor, beautiful to see.

"Burgundy!" he said--"the king of wine: And this is the king of Burgundies--Clos Vougeot. I drink to your health and happiness!"

He filled a second goblet for himself, and honored the toast by draining it to the bottom. I now understood the sparkle in his eyes and the flush in his cheeks. It was my interest not to offend him. I drank a little of his wine, and I quite agreed with him. I thought it delicious.

"What shall we eat?" he asked. "It must be something worthy of our Clos Vougeot. Ariel is good at roasting and boiling joints, poor wretch! but I don't insult your taste by offering you Ariel's cookery. Plain joints!" he exclaimed, with an expression of refined disgust. "Bah! A man who eats a plain joint is only one remove from a cannibal or a butcher. Will you leave it to me to discover something more worthy of us? Let us go to the kitchen."

He wheeled his chair around, and invited me to accompany him with a courteous wave of his hand.

I followed the chair to some closed curtains at one end of the room, which I had not hitherto noticed. Drawing aside the curtains, he revealed to view an alcove, in which stood a neat little gas-stove for cooking. Drawers and cupboards, plates, dishes, and saucepans, were ranged around the alcove--all on a miniature scale, all scrupulously bright and clean. "Welcome to the kitchen!" said Miserrimus Dexter. He drew out of a recess in the wall a marble slab, which served as a table, and reflected profoundly, with his hand to his head. "I have it!" he cried, and opening one of the cupboards next, took from it a black bottle of a form that was new to me. Sounding this bottle with a spike, he pierced and produced to view some little irregularly formed black objects, which might have been familiar enough to a woman accustomed to the luxurious tables of the rich, but which were a new revelation to a person like myself, who had led a simple country life in the house of a clergyman with small means. When I saw my host carefully lay out these occult substances of uninviting appearance on a clean napkin, and then plunge once more into profound reflection at the sight of them, my curiosity could be no longer restrained. I ventured to say, "What are those things, Mr. Dexter, and are we really going to eat them?"

He started at the rash question, and looked at me with hands outspread in irrepressible astonishment.

"Where is our boasted progress?" he cried. What is education but a name? Here is a cultivated person who doesn't know Truffles when she sees them!"

"I have heard of truffles," I answered, humbly, "but I never saw them before. We had no such foreign luxuries as those, Mr. Dexter, at home in the North."

Miserrimus Dexter lifted one of the truffles tenderly on his spike, and held it up to me in a favorable light.

"Make the most of one of the few first sensations in this life which has no ingredient of disappointment lurking under the surface," he said. "Look at it; meditate over it. You shall eat it, Mrs. Valeria, stewed in Burgundy!"

He lighted the gas for cooking with the air of a man who was about to offer me an inestimable proof of his good-will.

"Forgive me if I observe the most absolute silence," he said, "dating from the moment when I take this in my hand." He produced a bright little stew-pan from his collection

of culinary art as he spoke. "Properly pursued, the Art of Cooking allows no divided attention," he continued, gravely. "In that observation you will find the reason why no woman ever has reached, or ever will reach, the highest distinction as a cook. As a rule, women are incapable of absolutely concentrating their attention on any one occupation for any given time. Their minds will run on something else--say; typically, for the sake of illustration, their sweetheart or their new bonnet. The one obstacle, Mrs. Valeria, to your rising equal to the men in the various industrial processes of life is not raised, as the women vainly suppose, by the defective institutions of the age they live in. No! the obstacle is in themselves. No institutions that can be devised to encourage them will ever be strong enough to contend successfully with the sweetheart and the new bonnet. A little while ago, for instance, I was instrumental in getting women employed in our local post-office here. The other day I took the trouble--a serious business to me--of getting downstairs, and wheeling myself away to the office to see how they were getting on. I took a letter with me to register. It had an unusually long address. The registering woman began copying the address on the receipt form, in a business-like manner cheering and delightful to see. Half way through, a little child-sister of one of the other women employed trotted into the office, and popped under the counter to go and speak to her relative. The registering woman's mind instantly gave way. Her pencil stopped; her eyes wandered off to the child with a charming expression of interest. 'Well, Lucy,' she said, 'how d'ye do?' Then she remembered business again, and returned to her receipt. When I took it across the counter, an important line in the address of my letter was left out in the copy. Thanks to Lucy. Now a man in the same position would not have seen Lucy--he would have been too closely occupied with what he was about at the moment. There is the whole difference between the mental constitution of the sexes, which no legislation will ever alter as long as the world lasts! What does it matter? Women are infinitely superior to men in the moral qualities which are the true adornments of humanity. Be content--oh, my mistaken sisters, be content with that!"

He twisted his chair around toward the stove. It was useless to dispute the question with him, even if I had felt inclined to do so. He absorbed himself in his stew-pan.

I looked about me in the room.

The same insatiable relish for horrors exhibited downstairs by the pictures in the hall was displayed again here. The photographs hanging on the wall represented the various forms of madness taken from the life. The plaster casts ranged on the shelf opposite were casts (after death) of the heads of famous murderers. A frightful little skeleton of a woman hung in a cupboard, behind a glazed door, with this cynical inscription placed above the skull: "Behold the scaffolding on which beauty is built!" In a corresponding cupboard, with the door wide open, there hung in loose folds a shirt (as I took it to be) of chamois leather. Touching it (and finding it to be far softer than any chamois leather that my fingers had ever felt before), I disarranged the folds, and disclosed a ticket pinned among them, describing the thing in these horrid lines: "Skin of a French Marquis, tanned in the Revolution of Ninety-three. Who says the nobility are not good for something? They make good leather."

After this last specimen of my host's taste in curiosities, I pursued my investigation no further. I returned to my chair, and waited for the truffles.

After a brief interval, the voice of the poet-painter-composer-and-cook summoned me back to the alcove.

The gas was out. The stew-pan and its accompaniments had vanished. On the marble slab were two plates, two napkins, two rolls of bread, and a dish, with another napkin in it, on which reposed two quaint little black balls. Miserrimus Dexter, regarding me with a smile of benevolent interest, put one of the balls on my plate, and took the other himself. "Compose yourself, Mrs. Valeria," he said. "This is an epoch in your life. Your first Truffle! Don't touch it with the knife. Use the fork alone. And--pardon me; this is most important--eat slowly."

I followed my instructions, and assumed an enthusiasm which I honestly confess I did not feel. I privately thought the new vegetable a great deal too rich, and in other respects quite unworthy of the fuss that had been made about it. Miserrimus Dexter lingered and languished over his truffles, and sipped his wonderful Burgundy, and sang his own praises as a cook until I was really almost mad with impatience to return to the real object of my visit. In the reckless state of mind which this feeling produced, I abruptly reminded my host that he was wasting our time, by the most dangerous question that I could possibly put to him.

"Mr. Dexter," I said, "have you seen anything lately of Mrs. Beauty?"

The easy sense of enjoyment expressed in his face left it at those rash words, and went out like a suddenly extinguished light. That furtive distrust of me which I had already noticed instantly made itself felt again in his manner and in his voice.

"Do you know Mrs. Beauty?" he asked.

"I only know her," I answered, "by what I have read of her in the Trial."

He was not satisfied with that reply.

"You must have an interest of some sort in Mrs. Beauty," he said, "or you would not have asked me about her. Is it the interest of a friend, or the interest of an enemy?"

Rash as I might be, I was not quite reckless enough yet to meet that plain question by an equally plain reply. I saw enough in his face to warn me to be careful with him before it was too late.

"I can only answer you in one way," I rejoined. "I must return to a subject which is very painful to you--the subject of the Trial."

"Go on," he said, with one of his grim outbursts of humor. "Here I am at your mercy--a martyr at the stake. Poke the fire! poke the fire!"

"I am only an ignorant woman," I resumed, "and I dare say I am quite wrong; but there is one part of my husband's trial which doesn't at all satisfy me. The defense set up for him seems to me to have been a complete mistake."

"A complete mistake?" he repeated. "Strange language, Mrs. Valeria, to say the least of it!" He tried to speak lightly; he took up his goblet of wine; but I could see that I had produced an effect on him. His hand trembled as it carried the wine to his lips.

"I don't doubt that Eustace's first wife really asked him to buy the arsenic," I continued. "I don't doubt that she used it secretly to improve her complexion. But what I do not believe is that she died of an overdose of the poison, taken by mistake."

He put back the goblet of wine on the table near him so unsteadily that he spilled the greater part of it. For a moment his eyes met mine, then looked down again.

"How do you believe she died?" he inquired, in tones so low that I could barely hear them.

"By the hand of a poisoner," I answered.

He made a movement as if he were about to start up in the chair, and sank back again, seized, apparently, with a sudden faintness.

"Not my husband!" I hastened to add. "You know that I am satisfied of his innocence."

I saw him shudder. I saw his hands fasten their hold convulsively on the arms of his chair.

"Who poisoned her?" he asked, still lying helplessly back in the chair.

At the critical moment my courage failed me. I was afraid to tell him in what direction my suspicions pointed.

"Can't you guess?" I said.

There was a pause. I supposed him to be secretly following his own train of thought. It was not for long. On a sudden he started up in his chair. The prostration which had possessed him appeared to vanish in an instant. His eyes recovered their wild light; his hands were steady again; his color was brighter than ever. Had he been pondering over the secret of my interest in Mrs. Beaulieu? and had he guessed? He had!

"Answer on your word of honor!" he cried. "Don't attempt to deceive me! Is it a woman?"

"It is."

"What is the first letter of her name? Is it one of the first three letters of the alphabet?"

"Yes."

"B?"

"Yes."

"Beaulieu?"

"Beaulieu."

He threw his hands up above his head, and burst into a frantic fit of laughter.

"I have lived long enough!" he broke out, wildly. "At last I have discovered one other person in the world who sees it as plainly as I do. Cruel Mrs. Valeria! why did you torture me? Why didn't you own it before?"

"What!" I exclaimed, catching the infection of his excitement. "Are your ideas my ideas? Is it possible that you suspect Mrs. Beaulieu too?"

He made this remarkable reply:

"Suspect?" he repeated, contemptuously. "There isn't the shadow of a doubt about it. Mrs. Beaulieu poisoned her."