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[Wilkie Collins](#)

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Chapter 50 - The Last Of The Story

In ten days more we returned to England, accompanied by Benjamin.

Mrs. Macallan's house in London offered us ample accommodation. We gladly availed ourselves of her proposal, when she invited us to stay with her until our child was born, and our plans for the future were arranged.

The sad news from the asylum (for which Benjamin had prepared my mind at Paris) reached me soon after our return to England. Miserrimus Dexter's release from the burden of life had come to him by slow degrees. A few hours before he breathed his last he rallied for a while, and recognized Ariel at his bedside. He feebly pronounced her name, and looked at her, and asked for me. They thought of sending for me, but it was too late. Before the messenger could be dispatched, he said, with a touch of his old self-importance, "Silence, all of you! my brains are weary; I am going to sleep." He closed his eyes in slumber, and never awoke again. So for this man too the end came mercifully, without grief or pain! So that strange and many-sided life--with its guilt and its misery, its fitful flashes of poetry and humor, its fantastic gayety, cruelty, and vanity--ran its destined course, and faded out like a dream!

Alas for Ariel! She had lived for the Master--what more could she do, now the Master was gone? She could die for him.

They had mercifully allowed her to attend the funeral of Miserrimus Dexter--in the hope that the ceremony might avail to convince her of his death. The anticipation was not realized; she still persisted in denying that "the Master" had left her. They were obliged to restrain the poor creature by force when the coffin was lowered into the grave; and they could only remove her from the cemetery by the same means when the burial-service was over. From that time her life alternated, for a few weeks, between fits of raving delirium and intervals of lethargic repose. At the annual ball given in the asylum, when the strict superintendence of the patients was in some degree relaxed, the alarm was raised, a little before midnight, that Ariel was missing. The nurse in charge had left her asleep, and had yielded to the temptation of going downstairs to look at the dancing. When the woman returned to her post, Ariel was gone. The presence of strangers, and the confusion incidental to the festival, offered her facilities for escaping which would not have presented themselves at any other time. That night the search for her proved to be useless. The next morning brought with it the last touching and terrible tidings of her. She had strayed back to the burial-ground; and she had been found toward sunrise, dead of cold and exposure, on Miserrimus Dexter's grave. Faithful to the last, Ariel had followed the Master! Faithful to the last, Ariel had died on the Master's grave!

Having written these sad words, I turn willingly to a less painful theme.

Events had separated me from Major Fitz-David, after the date of the dinner-party which had witnessed my memorable meeting with Lady Clarinda. From that time I heard little or nothing of the Major; and I am ashamed to say I had almost entirely forgotten him--when I was reminded of the modern Don Juan by the amazing appearance of wedding-cards, addressed to me at my mother-in-law's house! The Major had settled in life at last. And, more wonderful still, the Major had chosen as the lawful ruler of his household and himself--"the future Queen of Song," the round-eyed, overdressed young lady with the strident soprano voice!

We paid our visit of congratulation in due form; and we really did feel for Major Fitz-David.

The ordeal of marriage had so changed my gay and gallant admirer of former times that I hardly knew him again. He had lost all his pretensions to youth: he had become, hopelessly and undisguisedly, an old man. Standing behind the chair on which his imperious young wife sat enthroned, he looked at her submissively between every two words that he addressed to me, as if he waited for her permission to open his lips and speak. Whenever she interrupted him--and she did it, over and over again, without ceremony--he submitted with a senile docility and admiration, at once absurd and shocking to see.

"Isn't she beautiful?" he said to me (in his wife's hearing!). "What a figure, and what a voice! You remember her voice? It's a loss, my dear lady, an irretrievable loss, to the operatic stage! Do you know, when I think what that grand creature might have done, I sometimes ask myself if I really had any right to marry her. I feel, upon my honor, I feel, as if I had committed a fraud on the public!"

As for the favored object of this quaint mixture of admiration and regret, she was pleased to receive me graciously, as an old friend. While Eustace was talking to the Major, the bride drew me aside out of their hearing, and explained her motives for marrying, with a candor which was positively shameless.

"You see we are a large family at home, quite unprovided for!" this odious young woman whispered in my ear. "It's all very well about my being a 'Queen of Song' and the rest of it. Lord bless you, I have been often enough to the opera, and I have learned enough of my music-master, to know what it takes to make a fine singer. I haven't the patience to work at it as those foreign women do: a parcel of brazen-faced Jezebels--I hate them! No! no! between you and me, it was a great deal easier to get the money by marrying the old gentleman. Here I am, provided for--and there's all my family provided for, too--and nothing to do but to spend the money. I am fond of my family; I'm a good daughter and sister--_I_ am! See how I'm dressed; look at the furniture: I haven't played my cards badly, have I? It's a great advantage to marry an old man--you can twist him round your little finger. Happy? Oh, yes! I'm quite happy; and I hope you are, too. Where are you living now? I shall call soon, and have a long gossip with you. I always had a sort of liking for you, and (now I'm as good as you are) I want to be friends."

I made a short and civil reply to this; determining inwardly that when she did visit me she should get no further than the house-door. I don't scruple to say that I was thoroughly disgusted with her. When a woman sells herself to a man, that vile bargain is none the less infamous (to my mind) because it happens to be made under the sanction of the Church and the Law.

As I sit at the desk thinking, the picture of the Major and his wife vanishes from my memory--and the last scene in my story comes slowly into view.

The place is my bedroom. The persons (both, if you will be pleased to excuse them, in bed) are myself and my son. He is already three weeks old; and he is now lying fast asleep by his mother's side. My good Uncle Starkweather is coming to London to baptize him. Mrs. Macallan will be his godmother; and his godfathers will be Benjamin and Mr. Playmore. I wonder whether my christening will pass off more merrily than my wedding?

The doctor has just left the house, in some little perplexity about me. He has found me reclining as usual (latterly) in my arm-chair; but on this particular day he has detected symptoms of exhaustion, which he finds quite unaccountable under the circumstances, and which warn him to exert his authority by sending me back to my bed.

The truth is that I have not taken the doctor into my confidence. There are two causes for those signs of exhaustion which have surprised my medical attendant--and the names of them are--Anxiety and Suspense.

On this day I have at last summoned courage enough to perform the promise which I made to my husband in Paris. He is informed, by this time, how his wife's Confession was discovered. He knows (on Mr. Playmore's authority) that the letter may be made the means, if he so will it, of publicly vindicating his innocence in a Court of Law. And, last and most important of all, he is now aware that the Confession itself has been kept a sealed secret from him, out of compassionate regard for his own peace of mind, as well as for the memory of the unhappy woman who was once his wife.

These necessary disclosures I have communicated to my husband--not by word of mouth; when the time came, I shrank from speaking to him personally of his first wife--but by a written statement of the circumstances, taken mainly out of my letters received in Paris from Benjamin and Mr. Playmore. He has now had ample time to read all that I have written to him, and to reflect on it in the retirement of his own study. I am waiting, with the fatal letter in my hand--and my mother-in-law is waiting in the next room to me--to hear from his own lips whether he decides to break the seal or not.

The minutes pass; and still we fail to hear his footstep on the stairs. My doubts as to which way his decision may turn affect me more and more uneasily the longer I wait. The very possession of the letter, in the present excited state of my nerves, oppresses and revolts me. I shrink from touching it or looking at it. I move it about restlessly from place to place on the bed, and still I cannot keep it out of my mind. At last, an odd fancy strikes me. I lift up one of the baby's hands, and put the letter under it--and so associate that dreadful record of sin and misery with something innocent and pretty that seems to hallow and to purify it.

The minutes pass; the half-hour longer strikes from the clock on the chimney-piece; and at last I hear him! He knocks softly, and opens the door.

He is deadly pale; I fancy I can detect traces of tears on his cheeks. But no outward signs of agitation escape him as he takes his seat by my side. I can see that he has waited until he could control himself--for my sake.

He takes my hand, and kisses me tenderly.

"Valeria!" he says; "let me once more ask you to forgive what I said and did in the bygone time. If I understand nothing else, my love, I understand this: The proof of my innocence has been found; and I owe it entirely to the courage and the devotion of my wife!"

I wait a little, to enjoy the full luxury of hearing him say those words--to revel in the love and the gratitude that moisten his dear eyes as they look at me. Then I rouse my resolution, and put the momentous question on which our future depends.

"Do you wish to see the letter, Eustace?"

Instead of answering directly, he questions me in his turn.

"Have you got the letter here?"

"Yes."

"Sealed up?"

"Sealed up."

He waits a little, considering what he is going to say next before he says it,

"Let me be sure that I know exactly what it is I have to decide," he proceeds. "Suppose I insist on reading the letter--?"

There I interrupt him. I know it is my duty to restrain myself. But I cannot do my duty.

"My darling, don't talk of reading the letter! Pray, pray spare yourself--"

He holds up his hand for silence.

"I am not thinking of myself," he says. "I am thinking of my dead wife. If I give up the public vindication of my innocence, in my own lifetime--if I leave the seal of the letter unbroken--do you say, as Mr. Playmore says, that I shall be acting mercifully and tenderly toward the memory of my wife?"

"Oh, Eustace, there cannot be the shadow of a doubt of it!"

"Shall I be making some little atonement for any pain that I may have thoughtlessly caused her to suffer in her lifetime?"

"Yes! yes!"

"And, Valeria--shall I please You?"

"My darling, you will enchant me!"

"Where is the letter?"

"In your son's hand, Eustace."

He goes around to the other side of the bed, and lifts the baby's little pink hand to his lips. For a while he waits so, in sad and secret communion with himself. I see his mother softly open the door, and watch him as I am watching him. In a moment more our suspense is at an end. With a heavy sigh, he lays the child's hand back again on the sealed letter; and by that one little action says (as if in words) to his son--"I leave it to You!"

And so it ended! Not as I thought it would end; not perhaps as you thought it would end. What do we know of our own lives? What do we know of the fulfillment of our dearest wishes? God knows--and that is best.

Must I shut up the paper? Yes. There is nothing more for you to read or for me to say.

Except this--as a postscript. Don't bear hardly, good people, on the follies and the errors of my husband's life. Abuse _me_ as much as you please. But pray think kindly of Eustace for my sake.

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