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[Authors](#)  
[Contact](#)

[The Law and the Lady](#)

[Wilkie Collins](#)

This Book:

[Contents](#)  
[Previous Chapter](#)  
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 42 - More Surprises

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The same evening I received my "abstract" by the hands of a clerk.

It was an intensely characteristic document. My expenses were remorselessly calculated downward to shillings and even to pence; and our unfortunate messenger's instructions in respect to his expenditure were reduced to a nicety which must have made his life in America nothing less than a burden to him. In mercy to the man, I took the liberty, when I wrote back to Mr. Playmore, of slightly increasing the indicated amount of the figures which were to appear on the check. I ought to have better known the correspondent whom I had to deal with. Mr. Playmore's reply (informing me that our emissary had started on his voyage) returned a receipt in due form, and the whole of the surplus money, to the last farthing!

A few hurried lines accompanied the "abstract," and stated the result of the lawyer's visit to Miserrimus Dexter.

There was no change for the better--there was no change at all. Mr. Dexter, the brother, had arrived at the house accompanied by a medical man accustomed to the charge of the insane. The new doctor declined to give any definite opinion on the case until he had studied it carefully with plenty of time at his disposal. It had been accordingly arranged that he should remove Miserrimus Dexter to the asylum of which he was the proprietor as soon as the preparations for receiving the patient could be completed. The one difficulty that still remained to be met related to the disposal of the faithful creature who had never left her master, night or day, since the catastrophe had happened. Ariel had no friends and no money. The proprietor of the asylum could not be expected to receive her without the customary payment; and Mr. Dexter's brother "regretted to say that he was not rich enough to find the money." A forcible separation from the one human being whom she loved, and a removal in the character of a pauper to a public asylum--such was the prospect which awaited the unfortunate creature unless some one interfered in her favor before the end of the week.

Under these sad circumstances, good Mr. Playmore--passing over the claims of economy in favor of the claims of humanity--suggested that we should privately start a subscription, and offered to head the list liberally himself.

I must have written all these pages to very little purpose if it is necessary for me to add that I instantly sent a letter to Mr. Dexter, the brother, undertaking to be answerable for whatever money was to be required while the subscriptions were being collected, and only stipulating that when Miserrimus Dexter was removed to the asylum, Ariel should accompany him. This was readily conceded. But serious objections were raised when I further requested that she might be permitted to attend on her master in the asylum as she had attended on him in the house. The rules of the establishment forbade it, and the universal practice in such cases forbade it, and so on, and so on. However, by dint of perseverance and persuasion, I so far carried my point as to gain a reasonable concession. During certain hours in the day, and under certain wise restrictions, Ariel was to be allowed the privilege of waiting on the Master in his room, as well as of accompanying him when he was brought out in his chair to take the air in the garden. For the honor of humanity, let me add that the liability which I had undertaken made no very serious demands on my resources. Placed in Benjamin's charge, our subscription-list prospered. Friends, and even strangers sometimes, opened their hearts and their purses when they heard Ariel's melancholy story.

The day which followed the day of Mr. Playmore's visit brought me news from Spain, in a letter from my mother-in-law. To describe what I felt when I broke the seal and read the first lines is simply impossible. Let Mrs. Macallan be heard on this occasion in my place.

Thus she wrote:

"Prepare yourself, my dearest Valeria, for a delightful surprise. Eustace has justified my confidence in him. When he returns to England, he returns--if you will let him--to his wife.

"This resolution, let me hasten to assure you, has not been brought about by any persuasions of mine. It is the natural outgrowth of your husband's gratitude and your husband's love. The first words he said to me, when he was able to speak, were these: 'If I live to return to England, and if I go to Valeria, do you think she will forgive me? We can only leave it to you, my dear, to give the answer. If you love us, answer us by return of post.

"Having now told you what he said when I first informed him that you had been his nurse--and remember, if it seem very little, that he is still too weak to speak except with difficulty--I shall purposely keep my letter back for a few days. My object is to give him time to think, and to frankly tell you of it if the interval produce any change in his resolution.

"Three days have passed, and there is no change. He has but one feeling now--he longs for the day which is to unite him again to his wife.

"But there is something else connected with Eustace that you ought to know, and that I ought to tell you.

"Greatly as time and suffering have altered him in many respects, there is no change, Valeria, in the aversion--the horror I may even say--with which he views your idea of inquiring anew into the circumstances which attended the lamentable death of his first wife. It makes no difference to him that you are only animated by a desire to serve his interests. 'Has she given up that idea? Are you positively sure she has given up that idea?' Over and over again he has put these questions to me. I have answered--what else could I do in the miserably feeble state in which he still lies?--I have answered in such a manner as to soothe and satisfy him. I have said, 'Relieve your mind of all anxiety on that subject: Valeria has no choice but to give up the idea; the obstacles in her way have proved to be insurmountable--the obstacles have conquered her.' This, if you remember, was what I really believed would happen when you and I spoke of that painful topic; and I have heard nothing from you since which has tended to shake my opinion in the smallest degree. If I am right (as I pray God I may be) in the view that I take, you have only to confirm me in your reply, and all will be well. In the other event--that is to say, if you are still determined to persevere in your hopeless project--then make up your mind to face the result. Set Eustace's prejudices at defiance in this particular, and you lose your hold on his gratitude, his penitence, and his love--you will, in my belief, never see him again.

"I express myself strongly, in your own interests, my dear, and for your own sake. When you reply, write a few lines to Eustace, inclosed in your letter to me.

"As for the date of our departure, it is still impossible for me to give you any definite information. Eustace recovers very slowly; the doctor has not yet allowed him to leave his bed; and when we do travel we must journey by easy stages. It will be at least six weeks, at the earliest, before we can hope to be back again in dear Old England.

"Affectionately yours,

"CATHERINE MACALLAN."

I laid down the letter, and did my best (vainly enough for some time) to compose my spirits. To understand the position in which I now found myself, it is only necessary to remember one circumstance: the messenger to whom we had committed our inquiries was at that moment crossing the Atlantic on his way to New York.

What was to be done?

I hesitated. Shocking as it may seem to some people, I hesitated. There was really no need to hurry my decision. I had the whole day before me.

I went out and took a wretched, lonely walk, and turned the matter over in my mind. I came home again, and turned the matter over once more by the fireside. To offend and repel my darling when he was returning to me, penitently returning of his own free will, was what no woman in my position, and feeling as I did, could under any earthly circumstances have brought herself to do. And yet, on the other hand, how in Heaven's name could I give up my grand enterprise at the very time when even wise and prudent Mr. Playmore saw such a prospect of succeeding in it that he had actually volunteered to help me? Placed between those two cruel alternatives, which could I choose? Think of your own frailties, and have some mercy on mine. I turned my back on both the alternatives. Those two agreeable fiends, Prevarication and Deceit, took me, as it were, softly by the hand: "Don't commit yourself either way, my dear," they said, in their most persuasive manner. "Write just enough to compose your mother-in-law and to satisfy your husband. You have got time before you. Wait and see if Time doesn't stand your friend, and get you out of the difficulty."

Infamous advice! And yet I took it--I, who had been well brought up, and who ought to have known better. You who read this shameful confession would have known better, I am sure. \_You\_ are not included, in the Prayer-book category, among the "miserable sinners."

Well! well! let me have virtue enough to tell the truth. In writing to my mother-in-law, I informed her that it had been found necessary to remove Miserrimus Dexter to an asylum--and I left her to draw her own conclusions from that fact, unenlightened by so much as one word of additional information. In the same way, I told my husband a part of the truth, and no more. I said I forgave him with all my heart--and I did! I said he had only to come to me, and I would receive him with open arms--and so I would! As for the rest, let me say with Hamlet--"The rest is silence."

Having dispatched my unworthy letters, I found myself growing restless, and feeling the want of a change. It would be necessary to wait at least eight or nine days before we could hope to hear by telegraph from New York. I bade farewell for a time to my dear and admirable Benjamin, and betook myself to my old home in the North, at the vicarage of my uncle Starkweather. My journey to Spain to nurse Eustace had made my peace with my worthy relatives; we had exchanged friendly letters; and I had promised to be their guest as soon as it was possible for me to leave London.

I passed a quiet and (all things considered) a happy time among the old scenes. I visited once more the bank by the river-side, where Eustace and I had first met. I walked again on the lawn and loitered through the shrubbery--those favorite haunts in which we had so often talked over our troubles, and so often forgotten them in a kiss. How sadly and strangely had our lives been parted since that time! How uncertain still was the fortune which the future had in store for us!

The associations amid which I was now living had their softening effect on my heart, their elevating influence over my mind. I reproached myself, bitterly reproached myself, for not having written more fully and frankly to Eustace. Why had I hesitated to sacrifice to him my hopes and my interests in the coming investigation? \_He\_ had not hesitated, poor fellow--\_his\_ first thought was the thought of his wife!

I had passed a fortnight with my uncle and aunt before I heard again from Mr. Playmore. When a letter from him arrived at last, it disappointed me indescribably. A telegram from our messenger informed us that the lodge-keeper's daughter and her husband had left New York, and that he was still in search of a trace of them.

There was nothing to be done but to wait as patiently as we could, on the chance of hearing better news. I remained in the North, by Mr. Playmore's advice, so as to be within an easy journey to Edinburgh--in case it might be necessary for me to consult him personally. Three more weeks of weary expectation passed before a second letter reached me. This time it was impossible to say whether the news were good or bad. It might have been either--it was simply bewildering. Even Mr. Playmore himself was taken by surprise. These were the last wonderful words--limited of course by considerations of economy--which reached us (by telegram) from our agent in America:

"Open the dust-heap at Gleninch."