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[The Law and the Lady](#)

[Wilkie Collins](#)

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

## Chapter 35 - Mr. Playmore's Prophecy

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WE reached London between eight and nine in the evening. Strictly methodical in all his habits, Benjamin had telegraphed to his housekeeper, from Edinburgh, to have supper ready or us by ten o'clock, and to send the cabman whom he always employed to meet us at the station.

Arriving at the villa, we were obliged to wait for a moment to let a pony-chaise get by us before we could draw up at Benjamin's door. The chaise passed very slowly, driven by a rough-looking man, with a pipe in his mouth. But for the man, I might have doubted whether the pony was quite a stranger to me. As things were, I thought no more of the matter.

Benjamin's respectable old housekeeper opened the garden gate, and startled me by bursting into a devout ejaculation of gratitude at the sight of her master. "The Lord be praised, sir!" she cried; "I thought you would never come back!"

"Anything wrong?" asked Benjamin, in his own impenetrably quiet way.

The housekeeper trembled at the question, and answered in these enigmatical words:

"My mind's upset, sir; and whether things are wrong or whether things are right is more than I can say. Hours ago, a strange man came in and asked"--she stopped, as if she were completely bewildered--looked for a moment vacantly at her master--and suddenly addressed herself to me. "And asked," she proceeded, "when you was expected back, ma'am. I told him what my master had telegraphed, and the man says upon that, 'Wait a bit,' he says: 'I'm coming back.' He came back in a minute or less; and he carried a Thing in his arms which curdled my blood--it did!--and set me shaking from the crown of my head to the sole of my foot. I know I ought to have stopped it; but I couldn't stand upon my legs, much less put the man out of the house. In he went, without 'with your leave,' or 'by your leave,' Mr. Benjamin, sir--in he went, with the Thing in his arms, straight through to your library. And there it has been all these hours. And there it is now. I've spoken to the police; but they wouldn't interfere; and what to do next is more than my poor head can tell. Don't you go in by yourself, ma'am! You'll be frightened out of your wits--you will!"

I persisted in entering the house, for all that. Aided by the pony, I easily solved the mystery of the housekeeper's otherwise unintelligible narrative. Passing through the dining-room (where the supper-table was already laid for us), I looked through the half-opened library door.

Yes, there was Miserrimus Dexter, arrayed in his pink jacket, fast asleep in Benjamin's favorite arm-chair! No coverlet hid his horrible deformity. Nothing was sacrificed to conventional ideas of propriety in his extraordinary dress. I could hardly wonder that the poor old housekeeper trembled from head to foot when she spoke of him.

"Valeria," said Benjamin, pointing to the Portent in the chair. "Which is it--an Indian idol, or a man?"

I have already described Miserrimus Dexter as possessing the sensitive ear of a dog: he now allowed that he also slept the light sleep of a dog. Quietly as Benjamin had spoken, the strange voice aroused him on the instant. He rubbed his eyes, and smiled as innocently as a waking child.

"How do you do, Mrs. Valeria?" he said. "I have had a nice little sleep. You don't know how happy I am to see you again. Who is this?"

He rubbed his eyes once more! and looked at Benjamin. Not knowing what else to do in this extraordinary emergency, I presented my visitor to the master of the house.

"Excuse my getting up, sir," said Miserrimus Dexter. "I can't get up--I have no legs. You look as if you thought I was occupying your chair? If I am committing an intrusion, be so good as to put your umbrella under me, and give me a jerk. I shall fall on my hands, and I shan't be offended with you. I will submit to a tumble and a scolding--but please don't break my heart by sending me away. That beautiful woman there can be very cruel sometimes, sir, when the fit takes her. She went away when I stood in the sorest need of a little talk with her--she went away, and left me to my loneliness and my suspense. I am a poor deformed wretch, with a warm heart, and, perhaps, an insatiable curiosity as well. Insatiable curiosity (have you ever felt it?) is a curse. I bore it until my brains began to boil in my head; and then I sent for my gardener, and made him drive me here. I like being here. The air of your library soothes me; the sight of Mrs. Valeria is balm to my wounded heart. She has something to tell me--something that I am dying to hear. If she is not too tired after her journey, and if you will let her tell it, I promise to have myself taken away when she has done. Dear Mr. Benjamin, you look like the refuge of the afflicted. I am afflicted. Shake hands like a good Christian, and take me in."

He held out his hand. His soft blue eyes melted into an expression of piteous entreaty. Completely stupefied by the amazing harangue of which he had been made the object, Benjamin took the offered hand, with the air of a man in a dream. "I hope I see you well, sir," he said, mechanically--and then looked around at me, to know what he was to do next.

"I understand Mr. Dexter," I whispered. "Leave him to me."

Benjamin stole a last bewildered look at the object in the chair; bowed to it, with the instinct of politeness which never failed him; and (still with the air of a man in a dream) withdrew into the next room.

Left together, we looked at each other, for the first moment, in silence.

Whether I unconsciously drew on that inexhaustible store of indulgence which a woman always keeps in reserve for a man who owns that he has need of her, or whether, resenting as I did Mr. Playmore's horrible suspicion of him, my heart was especially accessible to feelings of compassion in his unhappy case, I cannot tell. I only know that I pitied Miserrimus Dexter at that moment as I had never pitied him yet; and that I spared him the reproof which I should certainly have administered to any other man who had taken the liberty of establishing himself, uninvited, in Benjamin's house.

He was the first to speak.

"Lady Clarinda has destroyed your confidence in me!" he began, wildly.

"Lady Clarinda has done nothing of the sort," I replied. "She has not attempted to influence my opinion. I was really obliged to leave London, as I told you."

He sighed, and closed his eyes contentedly, as if I had relieved him of a heavy weight of anxiety.

"Be merciful to me," he said, "and tell me something more. I have been so miserable in your absence." He suddenly opened his eyes again, and looked at me with an appearance of the greatest interest. "Are you very much fatigued by traveling?" he proceeded. "I am hungry for news of what happened at the Major's dinner party. Is it so cruel of me to tell you so, when you have not rested after your journey? Only one question to-night, and I will leave the rest till to-morrow. What did Lady Clarinda say about Mrs. Beaulieu? All that you wanted to hear?"

"All, and more," I answered.

"What? what? what?" he cried wild with impatience in a moment.

Mr. Playmore's last prophetic words were vividly present to my mind. He had declared, in the most positive manner, that Dexter would persist in misleading me, and would show no signs of astonishment when I repeated what Lady Clarinda had told me of Mrs. Beaulieu. I resolved to put the lawyer's prophecy--so far as the question of astonishment was concerned--to the sharpest attainable test. I said not a word to Miserrimus Dexter in the way of preface or preparation: I burst on him with my news as abruptly as possible.

"The person you saw in the corridor was not Mrs. Beaulieu," I said. "It was the maid, dressed in her mistress's cloak and hat. Mrs. Beaulieu herself was not in the house at all. Mrs. Beaulieu herself was dancing at a masked ball in Edinburgh. There is what the maid told Lady Clarinda; and there is what Lady Clarinda told \_me.\_"

In the absorbing interest of the moment, I poured out those words one after another as fast as they would pass my lips. Miserrimus Dexter completely falsified the lawyer's prediction. He shuddered under the shock. His eyes opened wide with amazement. "Say it again!" he cried. "I can't take it all in at once. You stun me."

I was more than contented with this result--I triumphed in my victory. For once, I had really some reason to feel satisfied with myself. I had taken the Christian and merciful side in my discussion with Mr. Playmore; and I had won my reward. I could sit in the same room with Miserrimus Dexter, and feel the blessed conviction that I was not breathing the same air with a poisoner. Was it not worth the visit to Edinburgh to have made sure of that?

In repeating, at his own desire, what I had already said to him, I took care to add the details which made Lady Clarinda's narrative coherent and credible. He listened throughout with breathless attention--here and there repeating the words after me, to impress them the more surely and the more deeply on his mind.

"What is to be said? what is to be done?" he asked, with a look of blank despair. "I can't disbelieve it. From first to last, strange as it is, it sounds true."

(How would Mr. Playmore have felt if he had heard those words? I did him the justice to believe that he would have felt heartily ashamed of himself.)

"There is nothing to be said," I rejoined, "except that Mrs. Beaulieu is innocent, and that you and I have done her a grievous wrong. Don't you agree with me?"

"I entirely agree with you," he answered, without an instant's hesitation. "Mrs. Beaulieu is an innocent woman. The defense at the Trial was the right defense after all."

He folded his arms complacently; he looked perfectly satisfied to leave the matter there.

I was not of his mind. To my own amazement, I now found myself the least reasonable person of the two!

Miserrimus Dexter (to use the popular phrase) had given me more than I had bargained for. He had not only done all that I had anticipated in the way of falsifying Mr. Playmore's prediction--he had actually advanced beyond my limits. I could go the length of recognizing Mrs. Beaulieu's innocence; but at that point I stopped. If the Defense at the Trial were the right defense, farewell to all hope of asserting my husband's innocence. I held to that hope as I held to my love and my life.

"Speak for yourself," I said. "My opinion of the Defense remains unchanged."

He started, and knit his brows as if I had disappointed and displeased him.

"Does that mean that you are determined to go on?"

"It does."

He was downright angry with me. He cast his customary politeness to the winds.

"Absurd! impossible!" he cried, contemptuously. "You have yourself declared that we wronged an innocent woman when we suspected Mrs. Beaulieu. Is there any one else whom we can suspect? It is ridiculous to ask the question. There is no alternative left but to accept the facts as they are, and to stir no further in the matter of the poisoning at Gleninch. It is childish to dispute plain conclusions. You must give up."

"You may be angry with me if you will, Mr. Dexter. Neither your anger nor your arguments will make me give up."

He controlled himself by an effort--he was quiet and polite again when he next spoke to me.

"Very well. Pardon me for a moment if I absorb myself in my own thoughts. I want to do something which I have not done yet."

"What may that be, Mr. Dexter?"

"I am going to put myself into Mrs. Beaulieu's skin, and to think with Mrs. Beaulieu's mind. Give me a minute. Thank you."

What did he mean? what new transformation of him was passing before my eyes? Was there ever such a puzzle of a man as this? Who that saw him now, intently pursuing his new train of thought, would have recognized him as the childish creature who had awoke so innocently, and had astonished Benjamin by the infantine nonsense which he talked? It is said, and said truly, that there are many sides to every human character. Dexter's many sides were developing themselves at such a rapid rate of progress that they were already beyond my counting.

He lifted his head, and fixed a look of keen inquiry on me.

"I have come out of Mrs. Beaulys's skin," he announced. "And I have arrived at this result: We are two impetuous people; and we have been a little hasty in rushing at a conclusion."

He stopped. I said nothing. Was the shadow of a doubt of him beginning to rise in my mind? I waited, and listened.

"I am as fully satisfied as ever of the truth of what Lady Clarinda told you, he proceeded. "But I see, on consideration, what I failed to see at the time. The story admits of two interpretations--one on the surface, and another under the surface. I look under the surface, in your interests; and I say, it is just possible that Mrs. Beaulys may have been cunning enough to forestall suspicion, and to set up an Alibi."

I am ashamed to own that I did not understand what he meant by the last word--Alibi. He saw that I was not following him, and spoke out more plainly.

"Was the maid something more than her mistress's passive accomplice?" he said. "Was she the Hand that her mistress used? Was she on her way to give the first dose of poison when she passed me in this corridor? Did Mrs. Beaulys spend the night in Edinburgh--so as to have her defense ready, if suspicion fell upon her?"

My shadowy doubt of him became substantial doubt when I heard that. Had I absolved him a little too readily? Was he really trying to renew my suspicions of Mrs. Beaulys, as Mr. Playmore had foretold? This time I was obliged to answer him. In doing so, I unconsciously employed one of the phrases which the lawyer had used to me during my first interview with him.

"That sounds rather far-fetched, Mr. Dexter," I said.

To my relief, he made no attempt to defend the new view that he had advanced.

"It is far-fetched," he admitted. "When I said it was just possible--though I didn't claim much for my idea--I said more for it perhaps than it deserved. Dismiss my view as ridiculous; what are you to do next? If Mrs. Beaulys is not the poisoner (either by herself or by her maid), who is? She is innocent, and Eustace is innocent. Where is the other person whom you can suspect? Have    poisoned her?" he cried, with his eyes flashing, and his voice rising to its highest notes. "Do you, does anybody, suspect Me? I loved her; I adored her; I have never been the same man since her death. Hush! I will trust you with a secret. (Don't tell your husband; it might be the destruction of our friendship.) I would have married her, before she met with Eustace, if she would have taken me. When the doctors told me she had died poisoned--ask Doctor Jerome what I suffered;    can tell you! All through that horrible night I was awake; watching my opportunity until I found my way to her. I got into the room, and took my last leave of the cold remains of the angel whom I loved. I cried over her. I kissed her. for the first and last time. I stole one little lock of her hair. I have worn it ever since; I have kissed it night and day. Oh, God! the room comes back to me! the dead face comes back to me! Look! look!"

He tore from its place of concealment in his bosom a little locket, fastened by a ribbon around his neck. He threw it to me where I sat, and burst into a passion of tears.

A man in my place might have known what to do. Being only a woman, I yielded to the compassionate impulse of the moment.

I got up and crossed the room to him. I gave him back his locket, and put my hand, without knowing what I was about, on the poor wretch's shoulder. "I am incapable of suspecting you, Mr. Dexter," I said, gently. "No such idea ever entered my head. I pity you from the bottom of my heart."

He caught my hand in his, and devoured it with kisses. His lips burned me like fire. He twisted himself suddenly in the chair, and wound his arm around my waist. In the terror and indignation of the moment, vainly struggling with him, I cried out for help.

The door opened, and Benjamin appeared on the threshold.

Dexter let go his hold of me.

I ran to Benjamin, and prevented him from advancing into the room. In all my long experience of my fatherly old friend I had never seen him really angry yet. I saw him more than angry now. He was pale--the patient, gentle old man was pale with rage! I held him at the door with all my strength.

"You can't lay your hand on a cripple," I said. Send for the man outside to take him a way.

I drew Benjamin out of the room, and closed and locked the library door. The housekeeper was in the dining-room. I sent her out to call the driver of the pony-chaise into the house.

The man came in--the rough man whom I had noticed when we were approaching the garden gate. Benjamin opened the library door in stern silence. It was perhaps unworthy of me, but I could    resist the temptation to look in.

Miserrimus Dexter had sunk down in the chair. The rough man lifted his master with a gentleness that surprised me. "Hide my face," I heard Dexter say to him, in broken tones. He opened his coarse pilot-jacket, and hid his master's head under it, and so went silently out--with the deformed creature held to his bosom, like a woman sheltering her child.