

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

[The Law and the Lady](#)

[Wilkie Collins](#)

This Book:

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

Chapter 36 - Ariel

I PASSED a sleepless night.

The outrage that had been offered to me was bad enough in itself. But consequences were associated with it which might affect me more seriously still. In so far as the attainment of the one object of my life might yet depend on my personal association with Miserrimus Dexter, an insurmountable obstacle appeared to be now placed in my way. Even in my husband's interests, ought I to permit a man who had grossly insulted me to approach me again? Although I was no prude, I recoiled from the thought of it.

I arose late, and sat down at my desk, trying to summon energy enough to write to Mr. Playmore--and trying in vain.

Toward noon (while Benjamin happened to be out for a little while) the housekeeper announced the arrival of another strange visitor at the gate of the villa.

"It's a woman this time, ma'am--or something like one," said this worthy person, confidentially. "A great, stout, awkward, stupid creature, with a man's hat on and a man's stick in her hand. She says she has got a note for you, and she won't give it to anybody _but_ you. I'd better not let her in--had I?"

Recognizing the original of the picture, I astonished the housekeeper by consenting to receive the messenger immediately.

Ariel entered the room--in stolid silence, as usual. But I noticed a change in her which puzzled me. Her dull eyes were red and bloodshot. Traces of tears (as I fancied) were visible on her fat, shapeless cheeks. She crossed the room, on her way to my chair, with a less determined tread than was customary with her. Could Ariel (I asked myself) be woman enough to cry? Was it within the limits of possibility that Ariel should approach me in sorrow and in fear?

"I hear you have brought something for me?" I said. "Won't you sit down?"

She handed me a letter--without answering and without taking a chair. I opened the envelope. The letter inside was written by Miserrimus Dexter. It contained these lines:

"Try to pity me, if you have any pity left for a miserable man; I have bitterly expiated the madness of a moment. If you could see me--even you would own that my punishment has been heavy enough. For God's sake, don't abandon me! I was beside myself when I let the feeling that you have awakened in me get the better of my control. It shall never show itself again; it shall be a secret that dies with me. Can I expect you to believe this? No. I won't ask you to believe me; I won't ask you to trust me in the future. If you ever consent to see me again, let it be in the presence of any third person whom you may appoint to protect you. I deserve that--I will submit to it; I will wait till time has composed your angry feeling against me. All I ask now is leave to hope. Say to Ariel, 'I forgive him; and one day I will let him see me again.' She will remember it, for love of me. If you send her back without a message, you send me to the mad-house. Ask her, if you don't believe me.

"MISERRIMUS DEXTER."

I finished the strange letter, and looked at Ariel.

She stood with her eyes on the floor, and held out to me the thick walking-stick which she carried in her hand.

"Take the stick" were the first words she said to me.

"Why am I to take it?" I asked.

She struggled a little with her sluggishly working mind, and slowly put her thoughts into words.

"You're angry with the Master," she said. "Take it out on Me. Here's the stick. Beat me."

"Beat you!" I exclaimed.

"My back's broad," said the poor creature. "I won't make a row. I'll bear it. Drat you, take the stick! Don't vex _him._ Whack it out on my back. Beat _me._"

She roughly forced the stick into my hand; she turned her poor shapeless shoulders to me; waiting for the blow. It was at once dreadful and touching to see her. The tears rose in my eyes. I tried, gently and patiently, to reason with her. Quite useless! The idea of taking the Master's punishment on herself was the one idea in her mind. "Don't vex _him,_" she repeated. "Beat _me._"

"What do you mean by 'vexing him?'" I asked.

She tried to explain, and failed to find the words. She showed me by imitation, as a savage might have shown me, what she meant. Striding to the fire-place, she crouched on the rug, and looked into the fire with a horrible vacant stare. Then she clasped her hands over her forehead, and rocked slowly to and fro, still staring into the fire. "There's how he sits!" she said, with a sudden burst of speech. "Hours on hours, there's how he sits! Notices nobody. Cries about _you._"

The picture she presented recalled to my memory the Report of Dexter's health, and the doctor's plain warning of peril waiting for him in the future.

Even if I could have resisted Ariel, I must have yielded to the vague dread of consequences which now shook me in secret.

"Don't do that!" I cried. She was still rocking herself in imitation of the "Master," and still staring into the fire with her hands to her head. "Get up, pray! I am not angry with him now. I forgive him."

She rose on her hands and knees, and waited, looking up intently into my face. In that attitude--more like a dog than a human being--she repeated her customary petition when she wanted to fix words that interested her in her mind.

"Say it again!"

I did as she bade me. She was not satisfied.

"Say it as it is in the letter," she went on. "Say it as the Master said it to Me."

I looked back at the letter, and repeated the form of message contained in the latter part of it, word for word:

"I forgive him; and one day I will let him see me again."

She sprang to her feet at a bound. For the first time since she had entered the room her dull face began to break slowly into light and life.

"That's it!" she cried. "Hear if I can say it, too; hear if I've got it by heart."

Teaching her exactly as I should have taught a child, I slowly fastened the message, word by word, on her mind.

"Now rest yourself," I said; "and let me give you something to eat and drink after your long walk."

I might as well have spoken to one of the chairs. She snatched up her stick from the floor, and burst out with a hoarse shout of joy. "I've got it by heart!" she cried. "This will cool the Master's head! Hooray!" She dashed out into the passage like a wild animal escaping from its cage. I was just in time to see her tear open the garden gate, and set forth on her walk back at a pace which made it hopeless to attempt to follow and stop her.

I returned to the sitting-room, pondering on a question which has perplexed wiser heads than mine. Could a man who was hopelessly and entirely wicked have inspired such devoted attachment to him as Dexter had inspired in the faithful woman who had just left me? In the rough gardener who had carried him out so gently on the previous night? Who can decide? The greatest scoundrel living always has a friend--in a woman or a dog.

I sat down again at my desk, and made another attempt to write to Mr. Playmore.

Recalling, for the purpose of my letter, all that Miserrimus Dexter had said to me, my memory dwelt with special interest on the strange outbreak of feeling which had led him to betray the secret of his infatuation for Eustace's first wife. I saw again the ghastly scene in the death-chamber--the deformed creature crying over the corpse in the stillness of the first dark hours of the new day. The horrible picture took a strange hold on my mind. I arose, and walked up and down, and tried to turn my thoughts some other way. It was not to be done: the scene was too familiar to me to be easily dismissed. I had myself visited the room and looked at the bed. I had myself walked in the corridor which Dexter had crossed on his way to take his last leave of her.

The corridor? I stopped. My thoughts suddenly took a new direction, uninfluenced by any effort of my will.

What other association besides the association with Dexter did I connect with the corridor? Was it something I had seen during my visit to Gleninch? No. Was it something I had read? I snatched up the Report of the Trial to see. It opened at a page which contained the nurse's evidence. I read the evidence through again, without recovering the lost remembrance until I came to these lines close at the end:

"Before bed-time I went upstairs to prepare the remains of the deceased lady for the coffin. The room in which she lay was locked; the door leading into Mr. Macallan's room being secured, as well as the door leading into the corridor. The keys had been taken away by Mr. Gale. Two of the men-servants were posted outside the bedroom to keep watch. They were to be relieved at four in the morning--that was all they could tell me."

There was my lost association with the corridor! There was what I ought to have remembered when Miserrimus Dexter was telling me of his visit to the dead!

How had he got into the bedroom--the doors being locked, and the keys being taken away by Mr. Gale? There was but one of the locked doors of which Mr. Gale had not got the key--the door of communication between the study and the bedroom. The key was missing from this. Had it been stolen? And was Dexter the thief? He might have passed by the men on the watch while they were asleep, or he might have crossed the corridor in an unguarded interval while the men were being relieved. But how could he have got into the bedchamber except by way of the locked study door? He must have had the key! And he must have secreted it weeks before Mrs. Eustace Macallan's death! When the nurse first arrived at Gleninch, on the seventh of the month, her evidence declared the key of the door of communication to be then missing.

To what conclusion did these considerations and discoveries point? Had Miserrimus Dexter, in a moment of ungovernable agitation, unconsciously placed the key in my hands? Was the pivot on which turned the whole mystery of the poisoning at Gleninch the missing key?

I went back for the third time to my desk. The one person who might be trusted to find the answer to those questions was Mr. Playmore. I wrote him a full and careful account of all that had happened; I begged him to forgive and forget my ungracious reception of the advice which he had so kindly offered to me; and I promised beforehand to do nothing without first consulting his opinion in the new emergency which now confronted me.

The day was fine for the time of year; and by way of getting a little wholesome exercise after the surprises and occupations of the morning, I took my letter to Mr. Playmore to the post.

Returning to the villa, I was informed that another visitor was waiting to see me: a civilized visitor this time, who had given her name. My mother-in-law--Mrs. Macallan.