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[Authors](#)  
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[The Law and the Lady](#)

[Wilkie Collins](#)

This Book:

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

Chapter 38 - On The Journey Back

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IF I had been traveling homeward in my own carriage, the remaining chapters of this narrative would never have been written. Before we had been an hour on the road I should have called to the driver, and should have told him to turn back.

Who can be always resolute?

In asking that question, I speak of the women, not of the men. I had been resolute in turning a deaf ear to Mr. Playmore's doubts and cautions; resolute in holding out against my mother-in-law; resolute in taking my place by the French mail. Until ten minutes after we had driven away from the inn my courage held out--and then it failed me; then I said to myself, "You wretch, you have deserted your husband!" For hours afterward, if I could have stopped the mail, I would have done it. I hated the conductor, the kindest of men. I hated the Spanish ponies that drew us, the cheeriest animals that ever jingled a string of bells. I hated the bright day that would make things pleasant, and the bracing air that forced me to feel the luxury of breathing whether I liked it or not. Never was a journey more miserable than my safe and easy journey to the frontier. But one little comfort helped me to bear my heart-ache resignedly--a stolen morsel of Eustace's hair. We had started at an hour of the morning when he was still sound asleep. I could creep into his room, and kiss him, and cry over him softly, and cut off a stray lock of his hair, without danger of discovery. How I summoned resolution enough to leave him is, to this hour, not clear to my mind. I think my mother-in-law must have helped me, without meaning to do it. She came into the room with an erect head and a cold eye; she said, with an unmerciful emphasis on the word, "If you mean to go, Valeria, the carriage is here." Any woman with a spark of spirit in her would have "meant" it under those circumstances. I meant it--and did it.

And then I was sorry for it. Poor humanity! Time has got all the credit of being the great consoler of afflicted mortals. In my opinion, Time has been overrated in this matter. Distance does the same beneficent work far more speedily, and (when assisted by Change) far more effectually as well. On the railroad to Paris, I became capable of taking a sensible view of my position. I could now remind myself that my husband's reception of me--after the first surprise and the first happiness had passed away--might not have justified his mother's confidence in him. Admitting that I ran a risk in going back to Miserrimus Dexter, should I not have been equally rash, in another way, if I had returned, uninvited, to a husband who had declared that our conjugal happiness was impossible, and that our married life was at an end? Besides, who could say that the events of the future might not yet justify me--not only to myself, but to him? I might yet hear him say, "She was inquisitive when she had no business to inquire; she was obstinate when she ought to have listened to reason; she left my bedside when other women would have remained; but in the end she atoned for it all--she turned out to be right!"

I rested a day at Paris and wrote three letters.

One to Benjamin, telling him to expect me the next evening. One to Mr. Playmore, warning him, in good time, that I meant to make a last effort to penetrate the mystery at Gleninch. One to Eustace (of a few lines only), owning that I had helped to nurse him through the dangerous part of his illness; confessing the one reason which had prevailed with me to leave him; and entreating him to suspend his opinion of me until time had proved that I loved him more dearly than ever. This last letter I inclosed to my mother-in-law, leaving it to her discretion to choose the right time for giving it to her son. I positively forbade Mrs. Macallan, however, to tell Eustace of the new tie between us. Although he had separated himself from me, I was determined that he should not hear it from other lips than mine. Never mind why. There are certain little matters which I must keep to myself; and this is one of them.

My letters being written, my duty was done. I was free to play my last card in the game--the darkly doubtful game which was neither quite for me nor quite against me as the chances now stood.