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

[Wilkie Collins](#)

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

Chapter 40 - Nemesis At Last

THE gardener opened the gate to us on this occasion. He had evidently received his orders in anticipation of my arrival.

"Mrs. Valeria?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And friend?"

"And friend."

"Please to step upstairs. You know the house."

Crossing the hall, I stopped for a moment, and looked at a favorite walking-cane which Benjamin still kept in his hand.

"Your cane will only be in your way," I said. "Had you not better leave it here?"

"My cane may be useful upstairs," retorted Benjamin, gruffly. "_I_ haven't forgotten what happened in the library."

It was no time to contend with him. I led the way up the stairs.

Arriving at the upper flight of steps, I was startled by hearing a sudden cry from the room above. It was like the cry of a person in pain; and it was twice repeated before we entered the circular antechamber. I was the first to approach the inner room, and to see the many-sided Miserrimus Dexter in another new aspect of his character.

The unfortunate Ariel was standing before a table, with a dish of little cakes placed in front of her. Round each of her wrists was tied a string, the free ends of which (at a distance of a few yards) were held in Miserrimus Dexter's hands. "Try again, my beauty!" I heard him say, as I stopped on the threshold of the door. "Take a cake." At the word of command, Ariel submissively stretched out one arm toward the dish. Just as she touched a cake with the tips of her fingers her hand was jerked away by a pull at the string, so savagely cruel in the nimble and devilish violence of it that I felt inclined to snatch Benjamin's cane out of his hand and break it over Miserrimus Dexter's back. Ariel suffered the pain this time in Spartan silence. The position in which she stood enabled her to be the first to see me at the door. She had discovered me. Her teeth were set; her face was flushed under the struggle to restrain herself. Not even a sigh escaped her in my presence.

"Drop the string!" I called out, indignantly "Release her, Mr. Dexter, or I shall leave the house."

At the sound of my voice he burst out with a shrill cry of welcome. His eyes fastened on me with a fierce, devouring delight.

"Come in! come in!" he cried. "See what I am reduced to in the maddening suspense of waiting for you. See how I kill the time when the time parts us. Come in! come in! I am in one of my malicious humors this morning, caused entirely, Mrs. Valeria, by my anxiety to see you. When I am in my malicious humors I must tease something. I am teasing Ariel. Look at her! She has had nothing to eat all day, and she hasn't been quick enough to snatch a morsel of cake yet. You needn't pity her. Ariel has no nerves--I don't hurt her."

"Ariel has no nerves," echoed the poor creature, frowning at me for interfering between her master and herself. "He doesn't hurt me."

I heard Benjamin beginning to swing his cane behind him.

"Drop the string!" I reiterated, more vehemently than ever. "Drop it, or I shall instantly leave you."

Miserrimus Dexter's delicate nerves shuddered at my violence. "What a glorious voice!" he exclaimed--and dropped the string. "Take the cakes," he added, addressing Ariel in his most imperial manner.

She passed me, with the strings hanging from her swollen wrists, and the dish of cakes in her hand. She nodded her head at me defiantly.

"Ariel has got no nerves," she repeated, proudly. "He doesn't hurt me."

"You see," said Miserrimus Dexter, "there is no harm done--and I dropped the strings when you told me. Don't _begin_ by being hard on me, Mrs. Valeria, after your long absence." He paused. Benjamin, standing silent in the doorway, attracted his attention for the first time. "Who is this?" he asked, and wheeled his chair suspiciously nearer to the door. "I know!" he cried, before I could answer. "This is the benevolent gentleman who looked like the refuge of the afflicted when I saw him last.--You have altered for the worse since then, sir. You have stepped into quite a new character--you personify Retributive Justice now.--Your new protector, Mrs. Valeria--I understand!" He bowed low to Benjamin, with ferocious irony. "Your humble servant, Mr. Retributive Justice! I have deserved you--and I submit to you. Walk in, sir! I will take care that your new office shall be a sinecure. This lady is the Light of my Life. Catch me failing in respect to her if you can!" He backed his chair before Benjamin (who listened to him in contemptuous silence) until he reached the part of the room in which I was standing. "Your hand, Light of my Life!" he murmured in his gentlest tones. "Your hand--only to show that you have forgiven me!" I gave him my hand. "One?" he whispered, entreatingly. "Only one?" He kissed my hand once, respectfully--and dropped it with a heavy sigh. "Ah, poor Dexter!" he said, pitying himself with the whole sincerity of his egotism. "A warm heart--wasted in solitude, mocked by deformity. Sad! sad! Ah, poor Dexter!" He looked round again at Benjamin, with another flash of his ferocious irony. "A beauteous day, sir," he said, with mock-conventional courtesy. "Seasonable weather indeed after the late long-continued rains. Can I offer you any refreshment? Won't you sit down? Retributive Justice, when it is no taller than you are, looks best in a chair."

"And a monkey looks best in a cage," rejoined Benjamin, enraged at the satirical reference to his shortness of stature. "I was waiting, sir, to see you get into your swing."

The retort produced no effect on Miserrimus Dexter: it appeared to have passed by him unheard. He had changed again; he was thoughtful, he was subdued; his eyes were fixed on me with a sad and rapt attention. I took the nearest arm-chair, first casting a glance at Benjamin, which he immediately understood. He placed himself behind Dexter, at an angle which commanded a view of my chair. Ariel, silently devouring her cakes, crouched on a stool at "the Master's" feet, and looked up at him like a faithful dog. There was an interval of quiet and repose. I was able to observe Miserrimus Dexter uninterruptedly for the first time since I had entered the room.

I was not surprised--I was nothing less than alarmed by the change for the worse in him since we had last met. Mr. Playmore's letter had not prepared me for the serious deterioration in him which I could now discern.

His features were pinched and worn; the whole face seemed to have wasted strangely in substance and size since I had last seen it. The softness in his eyes was gone. Blood-red veins were intertwined all over them now: they were set in a piteous and vacant stare. His once firm hands looked withered; they trembled as they lay on the coverlet. The paleness of his face (exaggerated, perhaps, by the black velvet jacket that he wore) had a sodden and sickly look--the fine outline was gone. The multitudinous little wrinkles at the corners of his eyes had deepened. His head sank into his shoulders when he leaned forward in his chair. Years appeared to have passed over him, instead of months, while I had been absent from England. Remembering the medical report which Mr. Playmore had given me to read--recalling the doctor's positively declared opinion that the preservation of Dexter's sanity depended on the healthy condition of his nerves--I could not but feel that I had done wisely (if I might still hope for success) in hastening my return from Spain. Knowing what I knew, fearing what I feared, I believed that his time was near. I felt, when our eyes met by accident, that I was looking at a doomed man.

I pitied him.

Yes, yes! I know that compassion for him was utterly inconsistent with the motive which had taken me to his house--utterly inconsistent with the doubt, still present to my mind, whether Mr. Playmore had really wronged him in believing that his was the guilt which had compassed the first Mrs. Eustace's death. I felt this: I knew him to be cruel; I believed him to be false. And yet I pitied him! Is there a common fund of wickedness in us all? Is the suppression or the development of that wickedness a mere question of training and temptation? And is there something in our deeper sympathies which mutely acknowledges this when we feel for the wicked; when we crowd to a criminal trial; when we shake hands at parting (if we happen to be present officially) with the vilest monster that ever swung on a gallows? It is not for me to decide. I can only say that I pitied Miserrimus Dexter--and that he found it out.

"Thank you," he said, suddenly. "You see I am ill, and you feel for me. Dear and good Valeria!"

"This lady's name, sir, is Mrs. Eustace Macallan," interposed Benjamin, speaking sternly behind him. "The next time you address her, remember, if you please, that you have no business with her Christian name."

Benjamin's rebuke passed, like Benjamin's retort, unheeded and unheard. To all appearance, Miserrimus Dexter had completely forgotten that there was such a person in the room.

"You have delighted me with the sight of you," he went on. "Add to the pleasure by letting me hear your voice. Talk to me of yourself. Tell me what you have been doing since you left England."

It was necessary to my object to set the conversation afloat; and this was as good a way of doing it as any other. I told him plainly how I had been employed during my absence.

"So you are still fond of Eustace?" he said, bitterly.

"I love him more dearly than ever."

He lifted his hands, and hid his face. After waiting a while, he went on, speaking in an odd, muffled manner, still under cover of his hands.

"And you leave Eustace in Spain," he said; "and you return to England by yourself! What made you do that?"

"What made me first come here and ask you to help me, Mr. Dexter?"

He dropped his hands, and looked at me. I saw in his eyes, not amazement only, but alarm.

"Is it possible," he exclaimed, "that you won't let that miserable matter rest even yet? Are you still determined to penetrate the mystery at Gleninch?"

"I am still determined, Mr. Dexter; and I still hope that you may be able to help me."

The old distrust that I remembered so well darkened again over his face the moment I said those words.

"How can I help you?" he asked. "Can I alter facts?" He stopped. His face brightened again, as if some sudden sense of relief had come to him. "I did try to help you," he went on. "I told you that Mrs. Beauty's absence was a device to screen herself from suspicion; I told you that the poison might have been given by Mrs. Beauty's maid. Has my reflection convinced you? Do you see something in the idea?"

This return to Mrs. Beauty gave me my first chance of leading the talk to the right topic.

"I see nothing in the idea," I answered. "I see no motive. Had the maid any reason to be an enemy to the late Mrs. Eustace?"

"Nobody had any reason to be an enemy to the late Mrs. Eustace!" he broke out, loudly and vehemently. "She was all goodness, all kindness; she never injured any human creature in thought or deed. She was a saint upon earth. Respect her memory! Let the martyr rest in her grave!" He covered his face again with his hands, and shook and shuddered under the paroxysm of emotion that I had roused in him.

Ariel suddenly and softly left her stool, and approached me.

"Do you see my ten claws?" she whispered, holding out her hands. "Vex the Master again, and you will feel my ten claws on your throat!"

Benjamin rose from his seat: he had seen the action, without hearing the words. I signed to him to keep his place. Ariel returned to her stool, and looked up again at her master.

"Don't cry," she said. "Come on. Here are the strings. Tease me again. Make me screech with the smart of it."

He never answered, and never moved.

Ariel bent her slow mind to meet the difficulty of attracting his attention. I saw it in her frowning brows, in her colorless eyes looking at me vacantly. On a sudden, she joyfully struck the open palm of one of her hands with the fist of the other. She had triumphed. She had got an idea.

"Master!" she cried. "Master! You haven't told me a story for ever so long. Puzzle my thick head. Make my flesh creep. Come on. A good long story. All blood and crimes."

Had she accidentally hit on the right suggestion to strike his wayward fancy? I knew his high opinion of his own skill in "dramatic narrative." I knew that one of his favorite amusements was to puzzle Ariel by telling her stories that she could not understand. Would he wander away into the regions of wild romance? Or would he remember that my obstinacy still threatened him with reopening the inquiry into the tragedy at Gleninch? and would he set his cunning at work to mislead me by some new stratagem? This latter course was the course which my past experience of him suggested that he would take. But, to my surprise and alarm, I found my past experience at fault. Ariel succeeded in diverting his mind from the subject which had been in full possession of it the moment before she spoke! He showed his face again. It was overspread by a broad smile of gratified self-esteem. He was weak enough now to let even Ariel find her way to his vanity. I saw it with a sense of misgiving, with a doubt whether I had not delayed my visit until too late, which turned me cold from head to foot.

Miserrimus Dexter spoke--to Ariel, not to me.

"Poor devil!" he said, patting her head complacently. "You don't understand a word of my stories, do you? And yet I can make the flesh creep on your great clumsy body--and yet I can hold your muddled mind, and make you like it. Poor devil!" He leaned back serenely in his chair, and looked my way again. Would the sight of me remind him of the words that had passed between us not a minute since? No! There was the pleasantly tickled self-conceit smiling at me exactly as it had smiled at Ariel. "I excel in dramatic narrative, Mrs. Valeria," he said. "And this creature here on the stool is a remarkable proof of it. She is quite a psychological study when I tell her one of my stories. It is really amusing to see the half-witted wretch's desperate efforts to understand me. You shall have a specimen. I have been out of spirits while you were away--I haven't told her a story for weeks past; I will tell her one now. Don't suppose it's any effort to me! My invention is inexhaustible. You are sure to be amused--you are naturally serious--but you are sure to be amused. I am naturally serious too; and I always laugh at her."

Ariel clapped her great shapeless hands. "He always laughs at me!" she said, with a proud look of superiority directed straight at me.

I was at a loss, seriously at a loss, what to do.

The outbreak which I had provoked in leading him to speak of the late Mrs. Eustace warned me to be careful, and to wait for my opportunity before I reverted to _that_ subject. How else could I turn the conversation so as to lead him, little by little, toward the betrayal of the secrets which he was keeping from me? In this uncertainty, one thing only seemed to be plain. To let him tell his story would be simply to let him waste the precious minutes. With a vivid remembrance of Ariel's "ten claws," I decided, nevertheless on discouraging Dexter's new whim at every possible opportunity and by every means in my power.

"Now, Mrs. Valeria," he began, loudly and loftily, "listen. Now, Ariel, bring your brains to a focus. I improvise poetry; I improvise fiction. We will begin with the good old formula of the fairy stories. Once upon a time--"

I was waiting for my opportunity to interrupt him when he interrupted himself. He stopped, with a bewildered look. He put his hand to his head, and passed it backward and forward over his forehead. He laughed feebly.

"I seem to want rousing," he said

Was his mind gone? There had been no signs of it until I had unhappily stirred his memory of the dead mistress of Gleninch. Was the weakness which I had already noticed, was the bewilderment which I now saw, attributable to the influence of a passing disturbance only? In other words, had I witnessed nothing more serious than a first warning to him and to us? Would he soon recover himself, if we were patient, and gave him time? Even Benjamin was interested at last; I saw him trying to look at Dexter around the corner of the chair. Even Ariel was surprised and uneasy. She had no dark glances to cast at me now.

We all waited to see what he would do, to hear what he would say, next.

"My harp!" he cried. "Music will rouse me."

Ariel brought him his harp.

"Master," she said, wonderingly, "what's come to you?"

He waved his hand, commanding her to be silent.

"Ode to Invention," he announced, loftily, addressing himself to me. "Poetry and music improvised by Dexter. Silence! Attention!"

His fingers wandered feebly over the harpstrings, awakening no melody, suggesting no words. In a little while his hand dropped; his head sank forward gently, and rested on the frame of the harp. I started to my feet, and approached him. Was it a sleep? or was it a swoon?

I touched his arm, and called to him by his name.

Ariel instantly stepped between us, with a threatening look at me. At the same moment Miserrimus Dexter raised his head. My voice had reached him. He looked at me with a curious contemplative quietness in his eyes which I had never seen in them before.

"Take away the harp," he said to Ariel, speaking in languid tones, like a man who was very weary.

The mischievous, half-witted creature--in sheer stupidity or in downright malice, I am not sure which--irritated him once more.

"Why, Master?" she asked, staring at him with the harp hugged in her arms. "What's come to you? where is the story?"

"We don't want the story," I interposed. "I have many things to say to Mr. Dexter which I have not said yet."

Ariel lifted her heavy hand. "You will have it!" she said, and advanced toward me. At the same moment the Master's voice stopped her.

"Put away the harp, you fool!" he repeated, sternly. "And wait for the story until I choose to tell it."

She took the harp submissively back to its place at the end of the room. Miserrimus Dexter moved his chair a little closer to mine. "I know what will rouse me," he said, confidentially. "Exercise will do it. I have had no exercise lately. Wait a little, and you will see."

He put his hands on the machinery of the chair, and started on his customary course down the room. Here again the ominous change in him showed itself under a new form. The pace at which he traveled was not the furious pace that I remembered; the chair no longer rushed under him on rumbling and whistling wheels. It went, but it went slowly. Up the room and down the room he painfully urged it--and then he stopped for want of breath.

We followed him. Ariel was first, and Benjamin was by my side. He motioned impatiently to both of them to stand back, and to let me approach him alone.

"I'm out of practice," he said, faintly. "I hadn't the heart to make the wheels roar and the floor tremble while you were away."

Who would not have pitied him? Who would have remembered his misdeeds at that moment? Even Ariel felt it. I heard her beginning to whine and whimper behind me. The magician who alone could rouse the dormant sensibilities in her nature had awakened them now by his neglect. Her fatal cry was heard again, in mournful, moaning tones--

"What's come to you, Master? Where's the story?"

"Never mind her," I whispered to him. "You want the fresh air. Send for the gardener. Let us take a drive in your pony-chaise."

It was useless. Ariel would be noticed. The mournful cry came once more--

"Where's the story? where's the story?"

The sinking spirit leaped up in Dexter again.

"You wretch ! you fiend!" he cried, whirling his chair around, and facing her. "The story is coming. I _can_ tell it! I _will_ tell it! Wine! You whimpering idiot, get me the wine. Why didn't I think of it before? The kingly Burgundy! that's what I want, Valeria, to set my invention alight and flaming in my head. Glasses for everybody! Honor to the King of the Vintages--the Royal Clos Vougeot!"

Ariel opened the cupboard in the alcove, and produced the wine and the high Venetian glasses. Dexter drained his gobletful of Burgundy at a draught; he forced us to drink (or at least to pretend to drink) with him. Even Ariel had her share this time, and emptied her glass in rivalry with her master. The powerful wine mounted almost instantly to her weak head. She began to sing hoarsely a song of her own devising, in imitation of Dexter. It was nothing but the repetition, the endless mechanical repetition, of her demand for the story--"Tell us the story. Master! master! tell us the story!" Absorbed over his wine, the Master silently filled his goblet for the second time. Benjamin whispered to me while his eye was off us, "Take my advice, Valeria, for once; let us go."

"One last effort," I whispered back. "Only one!"

Ariel went drowsily on with her song--

"Tell us the story. Master! master! tell us the story."

Miserrimus Dexter looked up from his glass. The generous stimulant was beginning to do its work. I saw the color rising in his face. I saw the bright intelligence flashing again in his eyes. The Burgundy _had_ roused him! The good wine stood my friend, and offered me a last chance!

"No story," I said. "I want to talk to you, Mr. Dexter. I am not in the humor for a story."

"Not in the humor?" he repeated, with a gleam of the old impish irony showing itself again in his face. "That's an excuse. I see what it is! You think my invention is gone--and you are not frank enough to confess it. I'll show you you're wrong. I'll show you that Dexter is himself again. Silence, you Ariel, or you shall leave the room! I have got it, Mrs. Valeria, all laid out here, with scenes and characters complete." He touched his forehead, and looked at me with a furtive and smiling cunning before he added his next words. "It's the very thing to interest you, my fair friend. It's the story of a Mistress and a Maid. Come back to the fire and hear it."

The Story of a Mistress and a Maid? If that meant anything, it meant the story of Mrs. Beauly and her maid, told in disguise.

The title, and the look which had escaped him when he announced it, revived the hope that was well-nigh dead in me. He had rallied at last. He was again in possession of his natural foresight and his natural cunning. Under pretense of telling Ariel her story, he was evidently about to make the attempt to mislead me for the second time. The conclusion was irresistible. To use his own words--Dexter was himself again.

I took Benjamin's arm as we followed him back to the fire-place in the middle of the room.

"There is a chance for me yet," I whispered. "Don't forget the signals."

We returned to the places which we had already occupied. Ariel cast another threatening look at me. She had just sense enough left, after emptying her goblet of wine, to be on the watch for a new interruption on my part. I took care, of course, that nothing of the sort should happen. I was now as eager as Ariel to hear the story. The subject was full of snares for the narrator. At any moment, in the excitement of speaking, Dexter's memory of the true events might show itself reflected in the circumstances of the fiction. At any moment he might betray himself.

He looked around him, and began.

"My public, are you seated? My public, are you ready?" he asked, gayly. "Your face a little more this way," he added, in his softest and tenderest tones, motioning to me to turn my full face toward him. "Surely I am not asking too much? You look at the meanest creature that crawls--look at Me. Let me find my inspiration in your eyes. Let me feed my hungry admiration on your form. Come, have one little pitying smile left for the man whose happiness you have wrecked. Thank you, Light of my Life, thank you!" He kissed his hand to me, and threw himself back luxuriously in his chair. "The story," he resumed. "The story at last! In what form shall I cast it? In the dramatic form--the oldest way, the truest way, the shortest way of telling a story! Title first. A short title, a taking title: 'Mistress and Maid.' Scene, the land of romance--Italy. Time, the age of romance--the fifteenth century. Ha! look at Ariel. She knows no more about the fifteenth century than the cat in the kitchen, and yet she is interested already. Happy Ariel!"

Ariel looked at me again, in the double intoxication of the wine and the triumph.

"I know no more than the cat in the kitchen," she repeated, with a broad grin of gratified vanity. "I am 'happy Ariel!' What are you?"

Miserrimus Dexter laughed uproariously.

"Didn't I tell you?" he said. "Isn't she fun?--Persons of the Drama." he resumed: "three in number. Women only. Angelica, a noble lady; noble alike in spirit and in birth. Cunegonda, a beautiful devil in woman's form. Damoride, her unfortunate maid. First scene: a dark vaulted chamber in a castle. Time, evening. The owls are hooting in the wood; the frogs are croaking in the marsh.--Look at Ariel! Her flesh creeps; she shudders audibly. Admirable Ariel!"

My rival in the Master's favor eyed me defiantly. "Admirable Ariel!" she repeated, in drowsy accents. Miserrimus Dexter paused to take up his goblet of Burgundy--placed close at hand on a little sliding table attached to his chair. I watched him narrowly as he sipped the wine. The flush was still mounting in his face; the light was still brightening in his eyes. He set down his glass again, with a jovial smack of his lips--and went on:

"Persons present in the vaulted chamber: Cunegonda and Damoride. Cunegonda speaks. 'Damoride! 'Madam?' 'Who lies ill in the chamber above us?' 'Madam, the noble lady Angelica.' (A pause. Cunegonda speaks again.) 'Damoride! 'Madam?' 'How does Angelica like you?' 'Madam, the noble lady, sweet and good to all who approach her, is sweet and good to me.' 'Have you attended on her, Damoride?' 'Sometimes, madam, when the nurse was weary.' 'Has she taken her healing medicine from your hand?' 'Once or twice, madam, when I happened to be by.' 'Damoride, take this key and open the casket on the table there.' (Damoride obeys.) 'Do you see a green vial in the casket?' 'I see it, madam.' 'Take it out.' (Damoride obeys.) 'Do you see a liquid in the green vial? can you guess what it is?' 'No, madam.' 'Shall I tell you?' (Damoride bows respectfully.) 'Poison is in the vial.' (Damoride starts; she shrinks from the poison; she would fain put it aside. Her mistress signs to her to keep it in her hand; her mistress speaks.) 'Damoride, I have told you one of my secrets; shall I tell you another?' (Damoride waits, fearing what is to come. Her mistress speaks.) 'I hate the Lady Angelica. Her life stands between me and the joy of my heart. You hold her life in your hand.' (Damoride drops on her knees; she is a devout person; she crosses herself, and then she speaks.) 'Mistress, you terrify me. Mistress, what do I hear?' (Cunegonda advances, stands over her, looks down on her with terrible eyes, whispers the next words.) 'Damoride! the Lady Angelica must die--and I must not be suspected. The Lady Angelica must die--and by your hand.'"

He paused again. To sip the wine once more? No; to drink a deep draught of it this time.

Was the stimulant beginning to fail him already?

I looked at him attentively as he laid himself back again in his chair to consider for a moment before he went on.

The flush on his face was as deep as ever; but the brightness in his eyes was beginning to fade already. I had noticed that he spoke more and more slowly as he advanced to the later dialogue of the scene. Was he feeling the effort of invention already? Had the time come when the wine had done all that the wine could do for him?

We waited. Ariel sat watching him with vacantly staring eyes and vacantly open mouth. Ben jamin, impenetrably expecting the signal, kept his open note-book on his knee, covered by his hand. Miserrimus Dexter went on:

"Damoride hears those terrible words; Damoride clasps her hands in entreaty. 'Oh, madam! madam! how can I kill the dear and noble lady? What motive have I for harming her?' Cunegonda answers, 'You have the motive of obeying Me.' (Damoride falls with her face on the floor at her mistress's feet.) 'Madam, I cannot do it! Madam, I dare not do it!' Cunegonda answers, 'You run no risk: I have my plan for diverting discovery from myself, and my plan for diverting discovery from you.' Damoride repeats, 'I cannot do it! I dare not do it!' Cunegonda's eyes flash lightnings of rage. She takes from its place of concealment in her bosom--"

He stopped in the middle of the sentence, and put his hand to his head--not like a man in pain, but like a man who had lost his idea.

Would it be well if I tried to help him to recover his idea? or would it be wiser (if I could only do it) to keep silence?

I could see the drift of his story plainly enough. His object, under the thin disguise of the Italian romance, was to meet my unanswerable objection to suspecting Mrs. Beaulieu's maid--the objection that the woman had no motive for committing herself to an act of murder. If he could practically contradict this, by discovering a motive which I should be obliged to admit, his end would be gained. Those inquiries which I had pledged myself to pursue--those inquiries which might, at any moment, take a turn that directly concerned him--would, in that case, be successfully diverted from the right to the wrong person. The innocent maid would set my strictest scrutiny at defiance; and Dexter would be safely shielded behind her.

I determined to give him time. Not a word passed my lips.

The minutes followed each other. I waited in the deepest anxiety. It was a trying and a critical moment. If he succeeded in inventing a probable motive, and in shaping it neatly to suit the purpose of his story, he would prove, by that act alone, that there were reserves of mental power still left in him which the practiced eye of the Scotch doctor had failed to see. But the question was--would he do it?

He did it! Not in a new way; not in a convincing way; not without a painfully evident effort. Still, well done or ill done, he found a motive for the maid.

"Cunegonda," he resumed, "takes from its place of concealment in her bosom a written paper, and unfolds it. 'Look at this,' she says. Damoride looks at the paper, and sinks again at her mistress's feet in a paroxysm of horror and despair. Cunegonda is in possession of a shameful secret in the maid's past life. Cunegonda can say to her, 'Choose your alternative. Either submit to an exposure which disgraces you and--disgraces your parents forever--or make up your mind to obey Me.' Damoride might submit to the disgrace if it only affected herself. But her parents are honest people; she cannot disgrace her parents. She is driven to her last refuge--there is no hope of melting the hard heart of Cunegonda. Her only resource is to raise difficulties; she tries to show that there are obstacles between her and the crime. 'Madam! madam!' she cries; 'how can I do it, when the nurse is there to see me?' Cunegonda answers, 'Sometimes the nurse sleeps; sometimes the nurse is away.' Damoride still persists. 'Madam! madam! the door is kept locked, and the nurse has got the key.'"

The key! I instantly thought of the missing key at Gleninch. Had he thought of it too? He certainly checked himself as the word escaped him. I resolved to make the signal. I rested my elbow on the arm of my chair, and played with my earring. Benjamin took out his pencil and arranged his note-book so that Ariel could not see what he was about if she happened to look his way.

We waited until it pleased Miserrimus Dexter to proceed. The interval was a long one. His hand went up again to his forehead. A duller and duller look was palpably stealing over his eyes. When he did speak, it was not to go on with the narrative, but to put a question.

"Where did I leave off?" he asked.

My hopes sank again as rapidly as they had risen. I managed to answer him, however, without showing any change in my manner.

"You left off," I said, "where Damoride was speaking to Cunegonda--"

"Yes, yes!" he interposed. "And what did she say?"

"She said, 'The door is kept locked, and the nurse has got the key.'"

He instantly leaned forward in his chair.

"No!" he answered, vehemently. "You're wrong. 'Key?' Nonsense! I never said 'Key.'"

"I thought you did, Mr. Dexter."

"I never did! I said something else, and you have forgotten it."

I refrained from disputing with him, in fear of what might follow. We waited again. Benjamin, sullenly submitting to my caprices, had taken down the questions and answers that had passed between Dexter and myself. He still mechanically kept his page open, and still held his pencil in readiness to go on. Ariel, quietly submitting to the drowsy influence of the wine while Dexter's voice was in her ears, felt uneasily the change to silence. She glanced round her restlessly; she lifted her eyes to "the Master."

There he sat, silent, with his hand to his head, still struggling to marshal his wandering thoughts, still trying to see light through the darkness that was closing round him.

"Master!" cried Ariel, piteously. "What's become of the story?"

He started as if she had awakened him out of a sleep; he shook his head impatiently, as though he wanted to throw off some oppression that weighed upon it.

"Patience, patience," he said. "The story is going on again."

He dashed at it desperately; he picked up the first lost thread that fell in his way, reckless whether it were the right thread or the wrong one:

"Damoride fell on her knees. She burst into tears. She said--"

He stopped, and looked about him with vacant eyes.

"What name did I give the other woman?" he asked, not putting the question to me, or to either of my companions: asking it of himself, or asking it of the empty air.

"You called the other woman Cunegonda," I said.

At the sound of my voice his eyes turned slowly--turned on me, and yet failed to look at me. Dull and absent, still and changeless, they were eyes that seemed to be fixed on something far away. Even his voice was altered when he spoke next. It had dropped to a quiet, vacant, monotonous tone. I had heard something like it while I was watching by my husband's bedside, at the time of his delirium--when Eustace's mind appeared to be too weary to follow his speech. Was the end so near as this?

"I called her Cunegonda," he repeated. "And I called the other--"

He stopped once more.

"And you called the other Damoride," I said.

Ariel looked up at him with a broad stare of bewilderment. She pulled impatiently at the sleeve of his jacket to attract his notice.

"Is this the story, Master?" she asked.

He answered without looking at her, his changeless eyes still fixed, as it seemed, on something far away.

"This is the story," he said, absently. "But why Cunegonda? why Damoride? Why not Mistress and Maid? It's easier to remember Mistress and Maid--"

He hesitated; he shivered as he tried to raise himself in his chair. Then he seemed to rally "What did the Maid say to the Mistress?" he muttered. "What? what? what?" He hesitated again. Then something seemed to dawn upon him unexpectedly. Was it some new thought that had struck him? or some lost thought that he had recovered? Impossible to say.

He went on, suddenly and rapidly went on, in these strange words:

"The letter," the Maid said: 'the letter. Oh my heart. Every word a dagger. A dagger in my heart. Oh, you letter. Horrible, horrible, horrible letter.'"

What, in God's name, was he talking about? What did those words mean?

Was he unconsciously pursuing his faint and fragmentary recollections of a past time at Gleninch, under the delusion that he was going on with the story? In the wreck of the other faculties, was memory the last to sink? Was the truth, the dreadful truth, glimmering on me dimly through the awful shadow cast before it by the advancing, eclips e of the brain? My breath failed me; a nameless horror crept through my whole being.

Benjamin, with his pencil in his hand, cast one warning look at me. Ariel was quiet and satisfied. "Go on, Master," was all she said. "I like it! I like it! Go on with the story."

He went on--like a man sleeping with his eyes open, and talking in his sleep.

"The Maid said to the Mistress. No--the Mistress said to the Maid. The Mistress said, 'Show him the letter. Must, must, must do it.' The Maid said, 'No. Mustn't do it. Shan't show it. Stuff. Nonsense. Let him suffer. We can get him off. Show it? No. Let the worst come to the worst. Show it, then.' The Mistress said--" He paused, and waved his hand rapidly to and fro before his eyes, as if he were brushing away some visionary confusion or entanglement. "Which was it last?" he said--"Mistress or Maid? Mistress? No. Maid speaks, of course. Loud. Positive. 'You scoundrels. Keep away from that table. The Diary's there. Number Nine, Caldershaws. Ask for Dandie. You shan't have the Diary. A secret in your ear. The Diary will hang, him. I won't have him hanged. How dare you touch my chair? My chair is Me! How dare you touch Me?"

The last words burst on me like a gleam of light! I had read them in the Report of the Trial--in the evidence of the sheriff's officer. Miserrimus Dexter had spoken in those very terms when he had tried vainly to prevent the men from seizing my husband's papers, and when the men had pushed his chair out of the room. There was no doubt now of what his memory was busy with. The mystery at Gleninch! His last backward flight of thought circled feebly and more feebly nearer and nearer to the mystery at Gleninch!

Ariel aroused him again. She had no mercy on him; she insisted on hearing the whole story.

"Why do you stop, Master? Get along with it! get along with it! Tell us quick--what did the Missus say to the Maid?"

He laughed feebly, and tried to imitate her.

"What did the Missus say to the Maid?" he repeated. His laugh died away. He went on speaking, more and more vacantly, more and more rapidly. "The Mistress said to the Maid. We've got him off. What about the letter? Burn it now. No fire in the grate. No matches in the box. House topsy-turvy. Servants all gone. Tear it up. Shake it up in the basket. Along with the rest. Shake it up. Waste paper. Throw it away. Gone forever. Oh, Sara, Sara, Sara! Gone forever."

Ariel clapped her hands, and mimicked him in her turn.

"Oh, Sara, Sara, Sara!" she repeated. "'Gone forever.' That's prime, Master! Tell us--who was Sara?"

His lips moved, but his voice sank so low that I could barely hear him. He began again, with the old melancholy refrain:

"The Maid said to the Mistress. No--the Mistress said to the Maid--" He stopped abruptly, and raised himself erect in the chair; he threw up both his hands above his head, and burst into a frightful screaming laugh. "Aha-ha-ha-ha! How funny! Why don't you laugh? Funny, funny, funny, funny. Aha-ha-ha-ha-ha--"

He fell back in the chair. The shrill and dreadful laugh died away into a low sob. Then there was one long, deep, wearily drawn breath. Then nothing but a mute, vacant face turned up to the ceiling, with eyes that looked blindly, with lips parted in a senseless, changeless grin. Nemesis at last! The foretold doom had fallen on him. The night had come.

But one feeling animated me when the first shock was over. Even the horror of that fearful sight seemed only to increase the pity that I felt for the stricken wretch. I started impulsively to my feet. Seeing nothing, thinking of nothing but the helpless figure in the chair, I sprang forward to raise him, to revive him, to recall him (if such a thing might still be possible) to himself. At the first step that I took, I felt hands on me--I was violently drawn back. "Are you blind?" cried Benjamin, dragging me nearer and nearer to the door. "Look there!"

He pointed; and I looked.

Ariel had been beforehand with me. She had raised her master in the chair; she had got one arm around him. In her free hand she brandished an Indian club, torn from a "trophy" of Oriental weapons that ornamented the wall over the fire-place. The creature was transfigured! Her dull eyes glared like the eyes of a wild animal. She gnashed her teeth in the frenzy that possessed her. "You have done this!" she shouted to me, waving the club furiously around and around over her head. "Come near him, and I'll dash your brains out! I'll mash you till there's not a whole bone left in your skin!" Benjamin, still holding me with one hand opened the door with the other. I let him do with me as he would; Ariel fascinated me; I could look at nothing but Ariel. Her frenzy vanished as she saw us retreating. She dropped the club; she threw both arms around him, and nestled her head on his bosom, and sobbed and wept over him. "Master! master! They shan't vex you any more. Look up again. Laugh at me as you used to do. Say, 'Ariel, you're a fool.' Be like yourself again!" I was forced into the next room. I heard a long, low, wailing cry of misery from the poor creature who loved him with a dog's fidelity and a woman's devotion. The heavy door was closed between us. I was in the quiet antechamber, crying over that piteous sight; clinging to my kind old friend as helpless and as useless as a child.

Benjamin turned the key in the lock.

"There's no use in crying about it," he said, quietly. "It would be more to the purpose, Valeria, if you thanked God that you have got out of that room safe and sound. Come with me."

He took the key out of the lock, and led me downstairs into the hall. After a little consideration, he opened the front door of the house. The gardener was still quietly at work in the grounds.

"Your master is taken ill," Benjamin said; "and the woman who attends upon him has lost her head--if she ever had a head to lose. Where does the nearest doctor live?"

The man's devotion to Dexter showed itself as the woman's devotion had shown itself--in the man's rough way. He threw down his spade with an oath.

"The Master taken bad?" he said. "I'll fetch the doctor. I shall find him sooner than you will."

"Tell the doctor to bring a man with him," Benjamin added. "He may want help."

The gardener turned around sternly.

"_I'm_ the man," he said. "Nobody shall help but me."

He left us. I sat down on one of the chairs in the hall, and did my best to compose myself. Benjamin walked to and fro, deep in thought. "Both of them fond of him," I heard my old friend say to himself. "Half monkey, half man--and both of them fond of him. _That_ beats me."

The gardener returned with the doctor--a quiet, dark, resolute man. Benjamin advanced to meet them. "I have got the key," he said. "Shall I go upstairs with you?"

Without answering, the doctor drew Benjamin aside into a corner of the hall. The two talked together in low voices. At the end of it the doctor said, "Give me the key. You can be of no use; you will only irritate her."

With those words he beckoned to the gardener. He was about to lead the way up the stairs when I ventured to stop him.

"May I stay in the hall, sir?" I said. "I am very anxious to hear how it ends."

He looked at me for a moment before he replied.

"You had better go home, madam," he said. "Is the gardener acquainted with your address?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. I will let you know how it ends by means of the gardener. Take my advice. Go home."

Benjamin placed my arm in his. I looked back, and saw the doctor and the gardener ascending the stairs together on their way to the locked-up room.

"Never mind the doctor," I whispered. "Let's wait in the garden."

Benjamin would not hear of deceiving the doctor. "I mean to take you home," he said. I looked at him in amazement. My old friend, who was all meekness and submission so long as there was no emergency to try him, now showed the dormant reserve of manly spirit and decision in his nature as he had never (in my experience) shown it yet. He led me into the garden. We had kept our cab: it was waiting for us at the gate.

On our way home Benjamin produced his note-book.

"What's to be done, my dear, with the gibberish that I have written here?" he said.

"Have you written it all down?" I asked, in surprise.

"When I undertake a duty, I do it," he answered. "You never gave me the signal to leave off--you never moved your chair. I have written every word of it. What shall I do? Throw it out of the cab window?"

"Give it to me."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"I don't know yet. I will ask Mr. Playmore."