

Literature.org:

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

[The Law and the Lady](#)

[Wilkie Collins](#)

This Book:

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

Chapter 21 - I See My Way

IN the gray light of the new morning I closed the Report of my husband's Trial for the Murder of his first Wife.

No sense of fatigue overpowered me. I had no wish, after my long hours of reading and thinking, to lie down and sleep. It was strange, but it was so. I felt as if I _had_ slept, and had now just awakened--a new woman, with a new mind.

I could now at last understand Eustace's desertion of me. To a man of his refinement it would have been a martyrdom to meet his wife after she had read the things published of him to all the world in the Report. I felt that as he would have felt it. At the same time I thought he might have trusted Me to make amends to him for the martyrdom, and might have come back. Perhaps it might yet end in his coming back. In the meanwhile, and in that expectation, I pitied and forgave him with my whole heart.

One little matter only dwelt on my mind disagreeably, in spite of my philosophy. Did Eustace still secretly love Mrs. Beauty? or had I extinguished that passion in him? To what order of beauty did this lady belong? Were we by any chance, the least in the world like one another?

The window of my room looked to the east. I drew up the blind, and saw the sun rising grandly in a clear sky. The temptation to go out and breathe the fresh morning air was irresistible. I put on my hat and shawl, and took the Report of the Trial under my arm. The bolts of the back door were easily drawn. In another minute I was out in Benjamin's pretty little garden.

Composed and strengthened by the inviting solitude and the delicious air, I found courage enough to face the serious question that now confronted me--the question of the future.

I had read the Trial. I had vowed to devote my life to the sacred object of vindicating my husband's innocence. A solitary, defenseless woman, I stood pledged to myself to carry that desperate resolution through to an end. How was I to begin?

The bold way of beginning was surely the wise way in such a position as mine. I had good reasons (founded, as I have already mentioned, on the important part played by this witness at the Trial) for believing that the fittest person to advise and assist me was--Miserrimus Dexter. He might disappoint the expectations that I had fixed on him, or he might refuse to help me, or (like my uncle Starkweather) he might think I had taken leave of my senses. All these events were possible. Nevertheless, I held to my resolution to try the experiment. If he were in the land of the living, I decided that my first step at starting should take me to the deformed man with the strange name.

Supposing he received me, sympathized with me, understood me? What would he say? The nurse, in her evidence, had reported him as speaking in an off-hand manner. He would say, in all probability, "What do you mean to do? And how can I help you to do it?"

Had I answers ready if those two plain questions were put to me? Yes! if I dared own to any human creature what was at that very moment secretly fermenting in my mind. Yes! if I could confide to a stranger a suspicion roused in me by the Trial which I have been thus far afraid to mention even in these pages!

It must, nevertheless, be mentioned now. My suspicion led to results which are part of my story and part of my life.

Let me own, then, to begin with, that I closed the record of the Trial actually agreeing in one important particular with the opinion of my enemy and my husband's enemy--the Lord Advocate! He had characterized the explanation of Mrs. Eustace Macallan's death offered by the defense as a "clumsy subterfuge, in which no reasonable being could discern the smallest fragment of probability." Without going quite so far as this, I, too, could see no reason whatever in the evidence for assuming that the poor woman had taken an overdose of the poison by mistake. I believed that she had the arsenic secretly in her possession, and that she had tried, or intended to try, the use of it internally, for the purpose of improving her complexion. But further than this I could not advance. The more I thought of it, the more plainly justified the lawyers for the prosecution seemed to me to be in declaring that Mrs. Eustace Macallan had died by the hand of a poisoner--although they were entirely and certainly mistaken in charging my husband with the crime.

My husband being innocent, somebody else, on my own showing, must be guilty. Who among the persons inhabiting the house at the time had poisoned Mrs. Eustace Macallan? My suspicion in answering that question pointed straight to a woman. And the name of that woman was--Mrs. Beauty!

Yes! To that startling conclusion I had arrived. It was, to my mind, the inevitable result of reading the evidence.

Look back for a moment to the letter produced in court, signed "Helena," and addressed to Mr. Macallan. No reasonable person can doubt (though the Judges excused her from answering the question) that Mrs. Beauty was the writer. Very well. The letter offers, as I think, trustworthy evidence to show the state of the woman's mind when she paid her visit to Gleninch.

Writing to Mr. Macallan, at a time when she was married to another man--a man to whom she had engaged herself before she met with Mr. Macallan what does she say? She says, "When I think of your life sacrificed to that wretched woman, my heart bleeds for you." And, again, she says, "If it had been my unutterable happiness to love and cherish the best, the dearest of men, what a paradise of our own we might have lived in, what delicious hours we might have known!"

If this is not the language of a woman shamelessly and furiously in love with a man--not her husband--what is? She is so full of him that even her idea of another world (see the letter) is the idea of "embracing" Mr. Macallan's "soul." In this condition of mind and morals, the lady one day finds herself and her embraces free, through the death of her husband. As soon as she can decently visit she goes visiting; and in due course of time she becomes the guest of the man whom she adores. His wife is ill in her bed. The one other visitor at Gleninch is a cripple, who can only move in his chair on wheels. The lady has the house and the one beloved object in it all to herself. No obstacle stands between her and "the unutterable happiness of loving and cherishing the best, the dearest of men" but a poor, sick, ugly wife, for whom Mr. Macallan never has felt, and never can feel, the smallest particle of love.

Is it perfectly absurd to believe that such a woman as this, impelled by these motives, and surrounded by these circumstances, would be capable of committing a crime--if

the safe opportunity offered itself?

What does her own evidence say?

She admits that she had a conversation with Mrs. Eustace Macallan, in which that lady questioned her on the subject of cosmetic applications to the complexion." Did nothing else take place at that interview? Did Mrs. Beaulieu make no discoveries (afterward turned to fatal account) of the dangerous experiment which her hostess was then trying to improve her ugly complexion? All we know is that Mrs. Beaulieu said nothing about it.

What does the under-gardener say?

He heard a conversation between Mr. Macallan and Mrs. Beaulieu, which shows that the possibility of Mrs. Beaulieu becoming Mrs. Eustace Macallan had certainly presented itself to that lady's mind, and was certainly considered by her to be too dangerous a topic of discourse to be pursued. Innocent Mr. Macallan would have gone on talking. Mrs. Beaulieu is discreet and stops him.

And what does the nurse (Christina Ormsay) tell us?

On the day of Mrs. Eustace Macallan's death, the nurse is dismissed from attendance, and is sent downstairs. She leaves the sick woman, recovered from her first attack of illness, and able to amuse herself with writing. The nurse remains away for half an hour, and then gets uneasy at not hearing the invalid's bell. She goes to the Morning-Room to consult Mr. Macallan, and there she hears that Mrs. Beaulieu is missing. Mr. Macallan doesn't know where she is, and asks Mr. Dexter if he has seen her. Mr. Dexter had not set eyes on her. At what time does the disappearance of Mrs. Beaulieu take place? At the very time when Christina Ormsay had left Mrs. Eustace Macallan alone in her room!

Meanwhile the bell rings at last--rings violently. The nurse goes back to the sick-room at five minutes to eleven, or thereabouts, and finds that the bad symptoms of the morning have returned in a gravely aggravated form. A second dose of poison--larger than the dose administered in the early morning--has been given during the absence of the nurse, and (observe) during the disappearance also of Mrs. Beaulieu. The nurse looking out into the corridor for help, encounters Mrs. Beaulieu herself, innocently on her way from her own room--just up, we are to suppose, at eleven in the morning!--to inquire after the sick woman.

A little later Mrs. Beaulieu accompanies Mr. Macallan to visit the invalid. The dying woman casts a strange look at both of them, and tells them to leave her. Mr. Macallan understands this as the fretful outbreak of a person in pain, and waits in the room to tell the nurse that the doctor is sent for. What does Mrs. Beaulieu do?

She runs out panic-stricken the instant Mrs. Eustace Macallan looks at her. Even Mrs. Beaulieu, it seems, has a conscience!

Is there nothing to justify suspicion in such circumstances as these--circumstances sworn to on the oaths of the witnesses?

To me the conclusion is plain. Mrs. Beaulieu's hand gave that second dose of poison. Admit this; and the inference follows that she also gave the first dose in the early morning. How could she do it? Look again at the evidence. The nurse admits that she was asleep from past two in the morning to six. She also speaks of a locked door of communication with the sickroom, the key of which had been removed, nobody knew by whom. Some person must have stolen that key. Why not Mrs. Beaulieu?

One word more, and all that I had in my mind at that time will be honestly revealed.

Miserrimus Dexter, under cross-examination, had indirectly admitted that he had ideas of his own on the subject of Mrs. Eustace Macallan's death. At the same time he had spoken of Mrs. Beaulieu in a tone which plainly betrayed that he was no friend to that lady. Did _he_ suspect her too? My chief motive in deciding to ask his advice before I applied to any one else was to find an opportunity of putting that question to him. If he really thought of her as I did, my course was clear before me. The next step to take would be carefully to conceal my identity--and then to present myself, in the character of a harmless stranger, to Mrs. Beaulieu.

There were difficulties, of course, in my way. The first and greatest difficulty was to obtain an introduction to Miserrimus Dexter.

The composing influence of the fresh air in the garden had by this time made me readier to lie down and rest than to occupy my mind in reflecting on my difficulties. Little by little I grew too drowsy to think--then too lazy to go on walking. My bed looked wonderfully inviting as I passed by the open window of my room.

In five minutes more I had accepted the invitation of the bed, and had said farewell to my anxieties and my troubles. In five minutes more I was fast asleep.

A discreetly gentle knock at my door was the first sound that aroused me. I heard the voice of my good old Benjamin speaking outside.

"My dear! I am afraid you will be starved if I let you sleep any longer. It is half-past one o'clock; and a friend of yours has come to lunch with us."

A friend of mine? What friends had I? My husband was far away; and my uncle Starkweather had given me up in despair.

"Who is it?" I cried out from my bed, through the door.

"Major Fitz-David," Benjamin answered, by the same medium.

I sprang out of bed. The very man I wanted was waiting to see me! Major Fitz-David, as the phrase is, knew everybody. Intimate with my husband, he would certainly know my husband's old friend--Miserrimus Dexter.

Shall I confess that I took particular pains with my toilet, and that I kept the luncheon waiting? The woman doesn't live who would have done otherwise--when she had a particular favor to ask of Major Fitz-David.