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

[Man and Wife](#)

[Wilkie Collins](#)

This Book:

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

Chapter 14 - Geoffrey As A Letter-Writer

LORD HOLCHESTER'S servants--with the butler at their head--were on the look-out for Mr. Julius Delamayn's arrival from Scotland. The appearance of the two brothers together took the whole domestic establishment by surprise. Inquiries were addressed to the butler by Julius; Geoffrey standing by, and taking no other than a listener's part in the proceedings.

"Is my father alive?"

"His lordship, I am rejoiced to say, has astonished the doctors, Sir. He rallied last night in the most wonderful way. If things go on for the next eight-and-forty hours as they are going now, my lord's recovery is considered certain."

"What was the illness?"

"A paralytic stroke, Sir. When her ladyship telegraphed to you in Scotland the doctors had given his lordship up."

"Is my mother at home?"

"Her ladyship is at home to _you_, Sir."

The butler laid a special emphasis on the personal pronoun. Julius turned to his brother. The change for the better in the state of Lord Holchester's health made Geoffrey's position, at that moment, an embarrassing one. He had been positively forbidden to enter the house. His one excuse for setting that prohibitory sentence at defiance rested on the assumption that his father was actually dying. As matters now stood, Lord Holchester's order remained in full force. The under-servants in the hall (charged to obey that order as they valued their places) looked from "Mr. Geoffrey" to the butler, The butler looked from "Mr. Geoffrey" to "Mr. Julius." Julius looked at his brother. There was an awkward pause. The position of the second son was the position of a wild beast in the house--a creature to be got rid of, without risk to yourself, if you only knew how.

Geoffrey spoke, and solved the problem

"Open the door, one of you fellows," he said to the footmen. "I'm off."

"Wait a minute," interposed his brother. "It will be a sad disappointment to my mother to know that you have been here, and gone away again without seeing her. These are no ordinary circumstances, Geoffrey. Come up stairs with me--I'll take it on myself."

"I'm blessed if I take it on _myself!" returned Geoffrey. "Open the door!"

"Wait here, at any rate," pleaded Julius, "till I can send you down a message."

"Send your message to Nagle's Hotel. I'm at home at Nagle's--I'm not at home here."

At that point the discussion was interrupted by the appearance of a little terrier in the hall. Seeing strangers, the dog began to bark. Perfect tranquillity in the house had been absolutely insisted on by the doctors; and the servants, all trying together to catch the animal and quiet him, simply aggravated the noise he was making. Geoffrey solved this problem also in his own decisive way. He swung round as the dog was passing him, and kicked it with his heavy boot. The little creature fell on the spot, whining piteously. "My lady's pet dog!" exclaimed the butler. "You've broken its ribs, Sir." "I've broken it of barking, you mean," retorted Geoffrey. "Ribs be hanged!" He turned to his brother. "That settles it," he said, jocosely. "I'd better defer the pleasure of calling on dear mamma till the next opportunity. Ta-ta, Julius. You know where to find me. Come, and dine. We'll give you a steak at Nagle's that will make a man of you."

He went out. The tall footmen eyed his lordship's second son with unaffected respect. They had seen him, in public, at the annual festival of the Christian-Pugilistic Association, with "the gloves" on. He could have beaten the biggest man in the hall within an inch of his life in three minutes. The porter bowed as he threw open the door. The whole interest and attention of the domestic establishment then present was concentrated on Geoffrey. Julius went up stairs to his mother without attracting the slightest notice.

The month was August. The streets were empty. The vilest breeze that blows--a hot east wind in London--was the breeze abroad on that day. Even Geoffrey appeared to feel the influence of the weather as the cab carried him from his father's door to the hotel. He took off his hat, and unbuttoned his waistcoat, and lit his everlasting pipe, and growled and grumbled between his teeth in the intervals of smoking. Was it only the hot wind that wrung from him these demonstrations of discomfort? Or was there some secret anxiety in his mind which assisted the depressing influences of the day? There was a secret anxiety in his mind. And the name of it was--Anne.

As things actually were at that moment, what course was he to take with the unhappy woman who was waiting to hear from him at the Scotch inn?

To write? or not to write? That was the question with Geoffrey.

The preliminary difficulty, relating to addressing a letter to Anne at the inn, had been already provided for. She had decided--if it proved necessary to give her name, before Geoffrey joined her--to call herself Mrs., instead of Miss, Silvester. A letter addressed to "Mrs. Silvester" might be trusted to find its way to her without causing any embarrassment. The doubt was not here. The doubt lay, as usual, between two alternatives. Which course would it be wisest to take?--to inform Anne, by that day's post, that an interval of forty-eight hours must elapse before his father's recovery could be considered certain? Or to wait till the interval was over, and be guided by the result? Considering the alternatives in the cab, he decided that the wise course was to temporize with Anne, by reporting matters as they then stood.

Arrived at the hotel, he sat down to write the letter--doubted--and tore it up--doubted again--and began again--doubted once more--and tore up the second letter--rose and

his feet--and owned to himself (in unprintable language) that he couldn't for the life of him decide which was safest--to write or to wait.

In this difficulty, his healthy physical instincts sent him to healthy physical remedies for relief. "My mind's in a muddle," said Geoffrey. "I'll try a bath."

It was an elaborate bath, proceeding through many rooms, and combining many postures and applications. He steamed. He plunged. He simmered. He stood under a pipe, and received a cataract of cold water on his head. He was laid on his back; he was laid on his stomach; he was respectfully pounded and kneaded, from head to foot, by the knuckles of accomplished practitioners. He came out of it all, sleek, clear rosy, beautiful. He returned to the hotel, and took up the writing materials--and behold the intolerable indecision seized him again, declining to be washed out! This time he laid it all to Anne. "That infernal woman will be the ruin of me," said Geoffrey, taking up his hat. "I must try the dumb-bells."

The pursuit of the new remedy for stimulating a sluggish brain took him to a public house, kept by the professional pedestrian who had the honor of training him when he contended at Athletic Sports.

"A private room and the dumb-bells!" cried Geoffrey. "The heaviest you have got."

He stripped himself of his upper clothing, and set to work, with the heavy weights in each hand, waving them up and down, and backward and forward, in every attainable variety of movement, till his magnificent muscles seemed on the point of starting through his sleek skin. Little by little his animal spirits roused themselves. The strong exertion intoxicated the strong man. In sheer excitement he swore cheerfully--invoking thunder and lightning, explosion and blood, in return for the compliments profusely paid to him by the pedestrian and the pedestrian's son. "Pen, ink, and paper!" he roared, when he could use the dumb-bells no longer. "My mind's made up; I'll write, and have done with it!" He sat down to his writing on the spot; actually finished the letter; another minute would have dispatched it to the post--and, in that minute, the maddening indecision took possession of him once more. He opened the letter again, read it over again, and tore it up again. "I'm out of my mind!" cried Geoffrey, fixing his big bewildered blue eyes fiercely on the professor who trained him. "Thunder and lightning! Explosion and blood! Send for Crouch."

Crouch (known and respected wherever English manhood is known and respected) was a retired prize-fighter. He appeared with the third and last remedy for clearing the mind known to the Honorable Geoffrey Delamayn--namely, two pair of boxing-gloves in a carpet-bag.

The gentleman and the prize-fighter put on the gloves, and faced each other in the classically correct posture of pugilistic defense. "None of your play, mind!" growled Geoffrey. "Fight, you beggar, as if you were in the Ring again with orders to win." No man knew better than the great and terrible Crouch what real fighting meant, and what heavy blows might be given even with such apparently harmless weapons as stuffed and padded gloves. He pretended, and only pretended, to comply with his patron's request. Geoffrey rewarded him for his polite forbearance by knocking him down. The great and terrible rose with unruffled composure. "Well hit, Sir!" he said. "Try it with the other hand now." Geoffrey's temper was not under similar control. Invoking everlasting destruction on the frequently-blackened eyes of Crouch, he threatened instant withdrawal of his patronage and support unless the polite pugilist hit, then and there, as hard as he could. The hero of a hundred fights quailed at the dreadful prospect. "I've got a family to support," remarked Crouch. "If you _will_ have it, Sir--there it is!" The fall of Geoffrey followed, and shook the house. He was on his legs again in an instant--not satisfied even yet. "None of your body-hitting!" he roared. "Stick to my head. Thunder and lightning! explosion and blood! Knock it out of me! Stick to the head!" Obedient Crouch stuck to the head. The two gave and took blows which would have stunned--possibly have killed--any civilized member of the community. Now on one side of his patron's iron skull, and now on the other, the hammering of the prize-fighter's gloves fell, thump upon thump, horrible to hear--until even Geoffrey himself had had enough of it. "Thank you, Crouch," he said, speaking civilly to the man for the first time. "That will do. I feel nice and clear again." He shook his head two or three times, he was rubbed down like a horse by the professional runner; he drank a mighty draught of malt liquor; he recovered his good-humor as if by magic. "Want the pen and ink, Sir?" inquired his pedestrian host. "Not!" answered Geoffrey. "The muddle's out of me now. Pen and ink be hanged! I shall look up some of our fellows, and go to the play." He left the public house in the happiest condition of mental calm. Inspired by the stimulant application of Crouch's gloves, his torpid cunning had been shaken up into excellent working order at last. Write to Anne? Who but a fool would write to such a woman as that until he was forced to it? Wait and see what the chances of the next eight-and-forty hours might bring forth, and then write to her, or desert her, as the event might decide. It lay in a nut-shell, if you could only see it. Thanks to Crouch, he did see it--and so away in a pleasant temper for a dinner with "our fellows" and an evening at the play!