

# THE LAW AND THE LADY: A NOVEL.

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(From Author's MS. and Advance Sheets)

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## PART II.—PARADISE REGAINED.

### CHAPTER XII.

#### MORE SURPRISES!

I laid down the letter, and did my best (vainly enough for some time) to compose my spirits. To understand the position in which I now found myself, it is only necessary to remember one circumstance. The messenger to whom we had committed our inquiries was, at that moment, crossing the Atlantic on his way to New York.

What was to be done? I hesitated. Shocking as it may seem to some people, I hesitated. There was really no need to hurry my decision. I had the whole day before me.

I went out, and took a wretched lonely walk, and turned the matter over in my mind. I came home again, and turned the matter over once more, by the fireside. To offend and repel my darling when he was returning to me, penitently returning of his own free will, was what no woman in my position, and feeling as I did, could under any earthly circumstances have brought herself to do. And yet, on the other hand, how in Heaven's name could I give up my grand enterprise, at the very time when even wise and prudent Mr. Playmore saw such a prospect of succeeding in it that he had actually volunteered to help me! Placed between those two cruel alternatives, which could I choose? Think of your own frailties; and have some mercy on mine. I turned my back on both the alternatives. Those two agreeable friends, Prevarication and Deceit, took me as it were softly by the hand: "Don't commit yourself either way, my dear," they said in their most persuasive manner. "Write just enough to compose your mother-in-law, and to satisfy your husband. You have got time before you. Wait and see if Time doesn't stand your friend, and get you out of the difficulty."

Infamous advice! And yet, I took it—I, who had been well brought up, and who ought to have known better. You who read this shameful confession, would have known better, I am sure. You are not included, in the Prayer Book category, among the "miserable sinners."

Well! well! let me have virtue enough to tell the truth. In writing to my mother-in-law, I informed her that it had been found necessary to remove Miserrimus Dexter to an asylum—and I left her to draw her own conclusions from that fact, unenlightened by so much as one word of additional information. In the same way, I told my husband a part of the truth, and no more. I said I forgave him with all my heart—and I did! I said he had only to come to me, and I would receive him with open arms—and so I would! As for the rest, let me say with Hamlet: "The rest is silence."

Having despatched my unworthy letters, I found myself growing restless, and feeling the want of a change. It would be necessary to wait at least eight or nine days before we could hope to hear by telegraph from New York. I bade farewell for a time to my dear and admirable Benjamin, and betook myself to my old home in the North, at the vicarage of my Uncle Starkweather. My journey to Spain to nurse Eustace had made my peace with my worthy relatives; we had exchanged friendly letters; and I had promised to be their guest as soon as it was possible for me to leave London.

I passed a quiet, and (all things considered) a happy time among the old scenes. I visited once more the bank by the river side, where Eustace and I had first met. I walked again on the lawn, and loitered through the shrubbery—those favourite haunts in which we had so often talked over our troubles, and so often forgotten them in a kiss. How sadly and strangely had our lives been parted since that time! How uncertain still was the fortune which the future had in store for us!

The associations amid which I was now living had their softening effect on my heart, their elevating influence over my mind. I reproached myself, bitterly reproached myself, for not having written more fully and frankly to Eustace. Why had I hesitated to sacrifice to him my hopes and my interests in the coming investigation? He had not hesitated, poor fellow—his first thought was the thought of his wife!

I had passed a fortnight with my uncle and aunt before I heard again from Mr. Playmore. When a letter from him arrived at last, it disappointed me indescribably. A telegram from our messenger informed us that the lodge-keeper's daughter and her husband had left New York, and that he was still in search of a trace of them.

There was nothing to be done but to wait as patiently as we could, on the chance of hearing better news. I remained in the North, by Mr. Playmore's advice, so as to be within an easy journey to Edinburgh—in case it might be necessary for me to consult him personally. Three more weeks of weary expectation passed before a second letter reached me. This time it was impossible to say whether the news was good or bad. It might have been either—it was simply bewildering. Even Mr. Playmore himself was taken by surprise. These were the last

wonderful words—limited, of course, by considerations of economy—which reached us (by telegram) from our agent in America:—  
"Open the dust-heap at Gleninch."

### CHAPTER XLIII.

#### AT LAST!

My letter from Mr. Playmore, enclosing the agent's extraordinary telegram, was not inspired by the sanguine view of our prospects which he had expressed to me when we met at Benjamin's house.

"If the telegram means anything," he wrote, "it means that the fragments of the torn letter have been cast into the housemaid's bucket (along with the dust, the ashes, and the rest of the litter in the room), and have been emptied on the dust-heap at Gleninch. Since this was done, the accumulated refuse collected from the periodical cleanings of the house, during a term of nearly three years—including, of course, the ashes from the fires kept burning, for the greater part of the year, in the library and the picture gallery—have been poured upon the heap, and have buried the precious morsels of paper deeper and deeper, day by day. Even if we have a fair chance of finding these fragments, what hope can we feel, at this distance of time, of recovering them with the writing in a state of preservation? I shall be glad to hear, by return of post, if possible, how the matter strikes you. If you could make it convenient to consult with me personally in Edinburgh, we should save time, when time may be of serious importance to us. While you are at Doctor Starkweather's, you are within easy reach of this place. Please think of it."

I thought of it seriously enough. The foremost question which I had to consider was the question of my husband.

The departure of the mother and son from Spain had been so long delayed, by the surgeon's orders, that the travellers had only advanced on their homeward journey as far as Bordeaux, when I had last heard from Mrs. Macallan three or four days since. Allowing for an interval of repose at Bordeaux, and for the slow rate at which they would be compelled to move afterwards, I might still expect them to arrive in England some time before a letter from the agent in America could reach Mr. Playmore. How, in this position of affairs, I could contrive to join the lawyer in Edinburgh, after meeting my husband in London, it was not easy to see. The wise and the right way, as I thought, was to tell Mr. Playmore frankly that I was not mistress of my own movements, and that he had better address his next letter to me at Benjamin's house.

Writing to my legal adviser in this sense, I had a word of my own to add, on the subject of the torn letter.

In the last years of my father's life I had travelled with him in Italy; and I had seen in the Museum at Naples the wonderful relics of a bygone time discovered among the ruins of Pompeii. By way of encouraging Mr. Playmore, I now reminded him that the eruption which had overwhelmed the town had preserved, for more than six hundred years, such perishable things as the straw in which pottery has been packed; the paintings on house walls; the dresses worn by the inhabitants; and (most noticeable of all, in our case) a piece of ancient paper, still attached to the volcanic ashes which had fallen over it. If these discoveries had been made after a lapse of sixteen centuries, under a layer of dust and ashes on a large scale, surely we might hope to meet with similar cases of preservation, after a lapse of three or four years only, under a layer of dust and ashes on a small scale? Taking for granted (what was perhaps doubtful enough) that the fragments of the letter could be recovered, my own conviction was that the writing on them, though it might be faded, would certainly still be legible. The very accumulations which Mr. Playmore deplored would be the means of preserving them from the rain and the damp. With these modest hints I closed my letter; and thus for once, thanks to my Continental experience, I was able to instruct my lawyer!

Another day passed; and I heard nothing of the travellers.

I began to feel anxious. I made my preparations for my journey southward, over night; and I resolved to start for London the next day—unless I heard of some change in Mrs. Macallan's travelling arrangements in the interval.

The post of the next morning decided my course of action. It brought me a letter from my mother-in-law, which added one more to the memorable dates in my domestic calendar.

Eustace and his mother had advanced as far as Paris on their homeward journey, when a cruel disaster had befallen them. The fatigues of travelling, and the excitement of his anticipated meeting with me, had proved together to be too much for my husband. He had held out as far as Paris with the greatest difficulty; and he was now confined to his bed again, struck down by a relapse. The doctors, this time, had no fear for his life; provided that his patience would support him through a lengthened period of the most absolute repose.

"It now rests with you, Valeria," Mrs. Macallan wrote, "to fortify and comfort Eustace under this new calamity. Do not suppose that he has ever blamed, or thought of blaming you, for leaving him with me in Spain, as soon as he was declared out of danger. 'It was I who

left her,' he said to me, when we first talked about it; 'and it is my wife's right to expect that I should go back to her.' Those were his words, my dear; and he has done all he can to abide by them. Helpless in his bed, he now asks you to take the will for the deed, and to join him in Paris. I think I know you well enough, my child, to be sure that you will do this; and I need only add one word of caution, before I close my letter. Avoid all reference, not only to the Trial (you will do that of your own accord), but even to our house at Gleninch. You will understand how he feels, in his present state of nervous depression, when I tell you that I should never have ventured on asking you to join him here, if your letter had not informed me that your visits to Dexter were at an end. Would you believe it?—his horror of anything which recalls our past troubles is still so vivid, that he has actually asked me to give my consent to selling Gleninch!"

So Eustace's mother wrote of him. But she had not trusted entirely to her own powers of persuasion. A slip of paper was enclosed in her letter, containing these two lines, traced in pencil—oh, so feebly and so wearily!—by my poor darling himself:—

"I am too weak to travel any further, Valeria. Will you come to me and forgive me?" A few pencil-marks followed; but they were illegible. The writing of those two short sentences had exhausted him.

It is not saying much for myself, I know—but, having confessed it when I was wrong, let me at least record it when I did what was right—I decided instantly on giving up all further connection with the recovery of the torn letter. If Eustace asked me the question, I was resolved to be able to answer truly:—"I have made the sacrifice that assures your tranquillity. When resignation was hardest, I have humbled my obstinate spirit, and I have given way for my husband's sake."

There was half an hour to spare before I left the vicarage for the railway station. In that interval, I wrote again to Mr. Playmore; telling him plainly what my position was, and withdrawing at once and for ever, from all share in investigating the mystery which lay hidden under the dustheap at Gleninch.

### CHAPTER XLIV.

#### OUR NEW HONEYMOON

It is not to be disguised or denied that my spirits were depressed, on my journey to London.

To resign the one cherished purpose of my life, when I had suffered so much in pursuing it, and when I had (to all appearance) so nearly reached the realisation of my hopes, was putting to a hard trial a woman's fortitude, and a woman's sense of duty. Still, even if the opportunity had been offered to me, I would not have recalled my letter to Mr. Playmore. "It is done, and well done," I said to myself; "and I have only to wait a day to be reconciled to it—when I give my husband my first kiss."

I had planned and hoped to reach London, in time to start for Paris by the night-mail. But the train was twice delayed on the long journey from the north; and there was no help for it but to sleep at Benjamin's villa, and to defer my departure until the morning.

It was, of course, impossible for me to warn my old friend of the change in my plans. My arrival took him by surprise. I found him alone in his library, with a wonderful illumination of lamps and candles; absorbed over some morsels of torn paper scattered on the table before him.

"What in the world are you about?" I asked.

Benjamin blushed—I was going to say, like a young girl. But young girls have given up blushing in these latter days of the age we live in.

"Oh, nothing, nothing!" he said confusedly. "Don't notice it."

He stretched out his hand to brush the morsels of paper off the table. Those morsels raised a sudden suspicion in my mind. I stopped him.

"You have heard from Mr. Playmore?" I said. "Tell me the truth Benjamin. Yes, or No?"

Benjamin blushed a shade deeper, and answered "Yes."

"Where is the letter?"

"I mustn't show it to you, Valeria."

This (need I say it?) made me determined to see the letter. My best way of persuading Benjamin to show it to me was to tell him of the sacrifice that I had made to my husband's wishes. "I have no further voice in the matter," I added, when I had done. "It now rests entirely with Mr. Playmore to go on or to give up; and this is my last opportunity of discovering what he really thinks about it. Don't I deserve a little indulgence? Have I no claim to look at the letter?"

Benjamin was too much surprised, and too much pleased with me, when he heard what had happened, to be able to resist my entreaties. He gave me the letter.

Mr. Playmore wrote, to appeal confidentially to Benjamin as a commercial man. In the long course of his occupation in business, it was just possible that he might have heard of cases in which documents had been put together again, after having been torn up, by design or by accident. Even if his experience failed in

this particular, he might be able to refer to some authority in London who would be capable of giving an opinion on the subject. By way of explaining his strange request, Mr. Playmore reverted to the notes which Benjamin had taken at Miserrimus Dexter's house, and informed him of the serious importance of "the gibberish" which he had reported under protest. The letter closed by recommending that any correspondence which ensued should be kept a secret from me—on the ground that it might excite false hopes in my mind if I was informed of it.

I now understood the tone which my worthy adviser had adopted in writing to me. His interest in the recovery of the letter was evidently so overpowering, that common prudence compelled him to conceal it from me, in case of ultimate failure. This did not look as if Mr. Playmore was likely to give up the investigation, on my withdrawal from it. I glanced again at the fragments of paper on Benjamin's table, with an interest in them which I had not felt yet.

"Has anything been found at Gleninch?" I asked.

"No," said Benjamin. "I have only been trying experiments with a letter of my own, before I wrote to Mr. Playmore."

"Oh, you have torn up the letter, yourself, then?"

"Yes. And, to make it all the more difficult to put them together again, I shook up the pieces in a basket. It's a childish thing, to do, my dear, at my age—"

He stopped, looking very much ashamed of himself.

"Well," I went on; "and have you succeeded in putting your letter together again?"

"It's not very easy, Valeria. But I made a beginning. It's the same principle as the principle in the 'Puzzle' which we used to put together when I was a boy. Only get one central bit of it right, and the rest of the Puzzle falls into its place in a longer or shorter time. Please don't tell anybody, my dear. People might say I was in my dotage. To think of that gibberish in my note-book having a meaning in it, after all! I only got Mr. Playmore's letter this morning; and—I am really almost ashamed to mention it—I have been trying experiments on torn letters, off and on ever since. You won't tell upon me, will you?"

I answered the dear old man by a hearty embrace. Now that he had lost his steady moral balance, and had caught the infection of my enthusiasm, I loved him better than ever!

But I was not quite happy, though I tried to appear so. Struggle against it as I might, I felt a little mortified, when I remembered that I had resigned all further connection with the search for the letter at such a time as this. My one comfort was to think of Eustace. My one encouragement was to keep my mind fixed as constantly as possible on the bright change for the better that now appeared in the domestic prospect. Here, at least, there was no disaster to fear; here I could honestly feel that I had triumphed. My husband had come back to me of his own free will; he had not given way, under the hard weight of evidence—he had yielded to the nobler influences of his gratitude and his love. And I had taken him to my heart again—not because I had made discoveries which left him no other alternative than to live with me, but because I believed in the better mind that had come to him, and loved and trusted him without reserve. Was it not worth some sacrifice to have arrived at this result? True—most true! And yet I was a little out of spirits. Ah, well! well! the remedy was within a day's journey. The sooner I was with Eustace the better.

Early the next morning, I left London for Paris by the tidal-train. Benjamin accompanied me to the Terminus.

"I shall write to Edinburgh by to-day's post," he said, in the interval before the train moved out of the station. "I think I can find the man Mr. Playmore wants to help him, if he decides to go on. Have you any message to send, Valeria?"

"No. I have done with it, Benjamin; I have nothing more to say."

"Shall I write and tell you how it ends, if Mr. Playmore does really try the experiment at Gleninch?"

I answered, as I felt, a little bitterly.

"Yes," I said. "Write and tell me if the experiment fails."

My old friend smiled. He knew me better than I knew myself.

"All right!" he said resignedly. "I have got the address of your banker's correspondent in Paris. You will have to go there for money, my dear; and you may find a letter waiting for you in the office, when you least expect it. Let me hear how your husband goes on. Good-bye—and God bless you!"

That evening, I was restored to Eustace.

He was too weak, poor fellow, even to raise his head from the pillow. I knelt down at the bedside and kissed him. His languid weary eyes kindled with a new life, as my lips touched his. "I must try to live now," he whispered, "for your sake."

My mother-in-law had delicately left us together. When he said those words, the temptation to tell him of the new hope that had come to brighten our lives was more than I could resist.

"You must try to live now, Eustace," I said, "for some one else, besides me."