

# 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 XXI.

#### I SEE MY WAY.

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 characterised the explanation of Mrs. Eustace Macallan's death, offered by the defence, as "a clumsy subterfuge, in which no reasonable being could discern the smallest fragment of possibility." Without going 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 farther 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. Beaulieu!

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 at 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. Beaulieu 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." Add 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 it? 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 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—afterwards 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 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. Mac-

allan, 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 has 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 enquire 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 sick room, 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 roused 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 your's 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 favour to ask of Major Fitz-David.

### CHAPTER XXII.

#### THE MAJOR MAKES DIFFICULTIES.

As I opened the dining-room door, the Major hastened to meet me. He looked the brightest and the youngest of living elderly gentlemen—with his smart blue frock coat, his winning smile, his ruby ring, and his ready compliment. It was quite cheering to meet the modern Don Juan once more.

"I don't ask after your health," said the old gentlemen; "your eyes answer me, my dear lady, before I can put the question. At your age a long sleep is the true beauty-draught. Plenty of bed—there is the simple secret of keeping your good looks and living a long life—plenty of bed!"

"I have not been so long in my bed, Major, as you suppose. To tell the truth, I have been up all night, reading."

Major Fitz-David lifted his well-painted eyebrows, in polite surprise.

"What is the happy book which has interested you so deeply?" he asked.

"The book," I answered, "is the Trial of my husband for the murder of his first wife."

The Major's smile vanished. He drew back a step, with a look of dismay.

"Don't mention that horrid book!" he exclaimed. "Don't speak of that dreadful subject! What have beauty and grace to do with Trials, Poisonings, Horrors? Why, my charming friend, profane your lips by talking of such things? Why frighten away the Loves and the Graces that lie hid in your smile? Humour and old fellow who adores the Loves and the Graces, and who asks nothing better than to sun himself in your smile. Luncheon is ready. Let us be cheerful. Let us laugh, and lunch."

He led me to the table and filled my plate and my glass, with the air of a man who considered himself to be engaged in one of the most important occupations of his life. Benjamin kept the conversation going in the interval.

"Major Fitz-David brings you some news, my dear," he said. "Your mother-in-law, Mrs. Macallan, is coming here to see you to day."

My mother-in-law coming to see me! I turned eagerly to the Major for further information.

"Has Mrs. Macallan heard anything of my husband?" I asked. "Is she coming here to tell me about him?"

"She has heard from him, I believe," said the Major; "and she has also heard from your uncle the Vicar. Our excellent Starkweather has written to her—to what purpose I have not been informed. I only know that on receipt of his letter, she has decided on paying you a visit. I met the old lady last night at a party; and I tried hard to discover whether she was coming to you as your friend or your enemy. My powers of persuasion were completely thrown away on her. The fact is," said the Major, speaking in the character of a youth of five-and-twenty, making a modest confession, "I don't get on well with old women. Take the will for the deed, my sweet friend. I have tried to be of some use to you—and I have failed."

Those words offered me the opportunity for which I was waiting. I determined not to lose it.

"You can be of the greatest use to me," I said, "if you will allow me to presume, Major, on your past kindness. I want to ask you a question; and I may have a favour to beg when you have answered me."

Major Fitz-David set down his wine glass on its way to his lips, and looked at me with an appearance of breathless interest.

"Command me, my dear lady—I am your's and your's only," said the gallant old gentleman. "What do you wish to ask me?"

"I wish to ask if you know Miserrimus Dexter?"

"Good Heavens!" cried the Major; "that is an unexpected question! Know Miserrimus Dexter? I have known him for more years than I like to reckon up. What can be your object—?"

"I can tell you what my object is in two words," I interposed. "I want you to give me an introduction to Miserrimus Dexter."

My impression is that the Major turned pale under his paint. This, at any rate, is certain: his sparkling little grey eyes looked at me in undisguised bewilderment and alarm.

"You want to know Miserrimus Dexter?" he repeated, with the air of a man who doubted the evidence of his own senses. "Mr. Benjamin! have I taken too much of your excellent wine? Am I the victim of a delusion—or did our fair friend really ask me to give her an introduction to Miserrimus Dexter?"

Benjamin looked at me in some bewilderment on his side, and answered quite seriously.

"I think you said so, my dear."

"I certainly said so," I rejoined. What is there so very surprising in my request?"

"The man is mad!" cried the Major. "In all England you could not have picked out a person more essentially unfit to be introduced to a lady—to a young lady especially—than Dexter. Have you heard of his horrible deformity?"

"I have heard of it—and it doesn't daunt me."

"Doesn't daunt you? My dear lady, the man's mind is as deformed as his body. What Voltaire said satirically of the character of his countrymen in general, is literally true of Miserrimus Dexter. He is a mixture of the tiger and the monkey. At one moment he would frighten you; and at the next, he would set you screaming with laughter. I don't deny that he is clever in some respects—brilliantly clever, I admit. And I don't say that he is ever committed any acts of violence, or ever willingly injured anybody. But, for all that, he is mad, if ever a man was mad yet. Forgive me if the inquiry is impertinent. What can your motive possibly be for wanting an introduction to Miserrimus Dexter?"

"I want to consult him."

"May I ask on what subject?"

"On the subject of my husband's Trial."

Major Fitz-David groaned, and sought a momentary consolation in his friend Benjamin's claret.

"That dreadful subject again!" he exclaimed.

"Mr. Benjamin, why does she persist in dwelling on that dreadful subject?"

"I must dwell on what is now the one em-

ployment and the one hope of my life," I said. "I have reason to hope that Miserrimus Dexter can help me to clear my husband's character of the stain which the Scotch Verdict has left on it. Tiger and monkey as he may be, I am ready to run the risk of being introduced to him. And I ask you again—rashly and obstinately as I fear you will think—to give me the introduction. It will put you to no inconvenience. I won't trouble you to escort me; a letter to Mr. Dexter will do."

The Major looked piteously at Benjamin, and shook his head. Benjamin looked piteously at the Major, and shook his head.

"She appears to insist on it," said the Major. "Yes," said Benjamin. "She appears to insist on it."

"I won't take the responsibility, Mr. Benjamin, of sending her alone to Miserrimus Dexter."

"Shall I go with her, sir?"

The Major reflected. Benjamin, in the capacity of protector, did not appear to inspire our military friend with confidence. After a moment's consideration, a new idea seemed to strike him. He turned to me.

"My charming friend," he said, "be more charming than ever—consent to a compromise. Let us treat this difficulty about Dexter from a social point of view. What do you say to a little dinner?"

"A little dinner," the Major reiterated. "At my house. You insist on my introducing you to Dexter; and I refuse to trust you alone with that cracked-brained personage. The only alternative under the circumstances is to invite him to meet you, and to let you form your own opinion of him—under the protection of my roof. Who shall we have to meet you, besides?" pursued the Major, brightening with hospitable intentions. "We want a perfect galaxy of beauty round the table, as a species of compensation, when we have got Miserrimus Dexter as one of the guests. Madame Mirillifore is still in London. You would be sure to like her—she is charming; she possesses your firmness, your extraordinary tenacity of purpose. Yes, we will have Madame Mirillifore. Who else? Shall we say Lady Clarinda? Another charming person, Mr. Benjamin! You would be sure to admire her—she is so sympathetic, she resembles in so many respects our fair friend here. Yes, Lady Clarinda shall be one of us; and you shall sit next to her, Mr. Benjamin, as a proof of my sincere regard for you. Shall we have my young prima donna to sing to us in the evening? I think so. She is pretty; she will assist in obscuring the deformity of Dexter. Very well; there is our party completed. I will set myself up this evening and approach the question of dinner with my cook. Shall we say this day week," asked the Major, taking out his pocket-book—"at eight o'clock?"

I consented to the proposed compromise—but not very willingly. With a letter of introduction I might have seen Miserrimus Dexter that afternoon. As it was, the "little dinner" compelled me to wait in absolute inaction, through a whole week. However, there was no help for it but to submit. Major Fitz-David, in his polite way, could be as obstinate as I was. He had evidently made up his mind; and further opposition on my part would be of no service to me.

"Punctually at eight, Mr. Benjamin," reiterated the Major. "Put it down in your book."

Benjamin obeyed—with a side look at me, which I was at no loss to interpret. My good old friend did not relish meeting a man at dinner, who was described as "half tiger, half monkey;" and the privilege of sitting next to Lady Clarinda rather daunted than delighted him. It was all my doing, and he too had no choice but to submit. "Punctually at eight, sir," said poor old Benjamin, obediently recording his formidable engagement. "Please to take another glass of wine."

The Major looked at his watch, and rose—with fluent apologies for abruptly leaving the table.

"It is later than I thought," he said. "I have an appointment with a friend—a female friend; a most attractive person. You a little remind me of her, my dear lady—you resemble her in complexion; the same creamy paleness. I adore creamy paleness. As I was saying, I have an appointment with my friend; she does me the honour to ask my opinion on some very remarkable specimens of old lace. I have studied old lace. I study everything that can make me useful or agreeable to your enchanting sex. You won't forget our little dinner? I will send Dexter his invitation the moment I get home." He took my hand, and looked at it critically, with his head a little on one side. "A delicious hand," he said, "you don't mind my looking at it, you don't mind my kissing it—do you? A delicious hand is one of my weaknesses. I promise to repent and amend, one of these days."

"At your age, Major, do you think you have much time to lose?" asked a strange voice, speaking behind us.

We all three looked round towards the door. There stood my husband's mother, smiling satirically—with Benjamin's shy little maid-servant waiting to announce her.

Major Fitz-David was ready with his answer. The old soldier was not easily taken by surprise.

"Age, my dear Mrs. Macallan, is a purely relative expression," he said. "There are some people who are never young; and there are