

THE LAW AND THE LADY: A NOVEL.

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PART II.—PARADISE REGAINED.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MORE OF MY OBSTINACY.

Ariel was down stairs in the shadowy hall, half asleep, half awake, waiting to see the visitors clear of the house. Without speaking to us, without looking at us, she led the way down the dark garden walk, and locked the gate behind us. "Good night, Ariel," I called out to her over the paling. Nothing answered me but the tramp of her heavy footsteps returning to the house, and the dull thump, a moment afterwards, of the closing door.

The footman had thoughtfully lit the carriage lamps. Carrying one of them to serve as a lantern, he lighted us over the wilds of the brick-desert, and landed us safely on the path by the high road.

"Well!" said my mother-in-law, when we were comfortably seated in the carriage again. "You have seen Miserrimus Dexter; and I hope you are satisfied? I will do him the justice to declare that I never, in all my experience, saw him more completely crazy than he was to-night. What do you say?"

"I don't presume to dispute your opinion," I answered. "But, speaking for myself, I am not quite sure that he is mad."

"Not mad!" cried Mrs. Macallan, "after those frantic performances in his chair? Not mad, after the exhibition he made of his unfortunate cousin? Not mad, after the song that he sang in your honour, and the falling asleep by way of conclusion? Oh, Valeria! Valeria! Well, said the wisdom of our ancestors—there are none so blind as those who won't see!"

"Pardon me, dear Mrs. Macallan—I saw everything that you mention; and I never felt more surprised, or more confounded, in my life. But now I have recovered from my amazement, and can think over it quietly. I must still venture to doubt whether this strange man is really mad, in the true meaning of the word. It seems to me that he openly expresses—I admit in a very reckless and boisterous way—thoughts and feelings which most of us are ashamed of as weakness, and which we keep to ourselves accordingly. I confess I have often fancied myself transformed into some other person, and have felt a certain pleasure in seeing myself in my new character. One of our first amusements as children (if we have any imagination at all) is to get out of our own characters, and to try the characters of other personages as a change—to be fairies, to be queens, to be anything in short but what we really are. Mr. Dexter lets out the secret, just as the children do—and if that is madness, he is certainly mad. But I noticed that when his imagination cooled down he became Miserrimus Dexter again—he no more believed himself, than we believed him, to be Napoleon or Shakespeare. Besides, some allowance is surely to be made for the solitary, sedentary life that he leads. I am not learned enough to trace the influence of that life in making him what he is. But I think I can see the result in an over-excited imagination; and I fancy I can trace his exhibiting his power over the poor cousin, and his singing of that wonderful song, to no more formidable cause than inward self-conceit. I hope the confession will not lower me seriously in your good opinion—but I must say I have enjoyed my visit; and, worse still, Miserrimus Dexter really interests me!"

"Does this learned discourse on Dexter mean that you are going to see him again?" asked Mrs. Macallan.

"I don't know how I may feel about it to-morrow morning," I said. "But my impulse at this moment is decidedly to see him again. I had a little talk with him, while you were away at the other end of the room; and I believe he really can be of use to me—"

"Of use to you, in what?" interposed my mother-in-law.

"In the one object which I have in view—the object, dear Mrs. Macallan, which I regret to say you do not approve."

"And you are going to take him into your confidence? to open your whole mind to such a man as the man we have just left?"

"Yes—if I think of it to-morrow, as I think of it to-night. I dare say it is a risk; but I must run risks. I know I am not prudent; but prudence won't help a woman in my position, with my end to gain."

"Mrs. Macallan made no further remonstrance, in words. She opened a capacious pocket in front of the carriage, and took from it a box of matches and a railway reading-lamp.

"You provoke me," said the old lady, "into showing you what your husband thinks of this new whim of yours. I have got his letter with me—his last letter from Spain. You shall judge for yourself, you poor deluded young creature, whether my son is worthy of the sacrifice, the useless and hopeless sacrifice, which you are bent on making of yourself, for his sake. Strike a light!"

I willingly obeyed her. Ever since she had informed me of Eustace's departure to Spain, I had been eager for more news of him—for something to sustain my spirits, after so much

that had disappointed and depressed me. Thus far, I did not even know whether my husband thought of me sometimes in his self-imposed exile. As to his regretting already the rash act which had separated us, it was still too soon to begin hoping for that.

The lamp having been lit, and fixed in its place between the two front windows of the carriage, Mrs. Macallan produced her son's letter. There is no folly like the folly of love. It cost me a hard struggle to restrain myself from kissing the paper on which the dear hand had rested.

"There!" said my mother-in-law. "Begin on the second page; the page devoted to you. Read straight down to the last line at the bottom—and, in God's name, come back to your senses, child, before it is too late!"

I followed my instructions, and read these words:

"Can I trust myself to write of Valeria? I must write of her! Tell me how she is, how she looks, what she is doing. I am always thinking of her. Not a day passes but I mourn the loss of her. Oh, if she had only been contented to let matters rest as they were! Oh, if she had never discovered the miserable truth!"

"She spoke of reading the Trial, when I saw her last. Has she persisted in doing so? I believe—I say this seriously, mother—I believe the shame and the horror of it would have been the death of me, if I had met her face to face, when she first knew of the ignominy that I have suffered, of the infamous suspicion of which I have been publicly made the subject. Think of those pure eyes looking at a man who has been accused (and never wholly observed) of the foulest and the vilest of all murders—and then think of what that man must feel, if he has any heart and any sense of shame left in him. I shiver as I write of it."

"Does she still meditate that hopeless project—the offspring, poor angel, of her artless unthinking generosity? Does she still fancy that it is in her power to assert my innocence before the world? Oh, mother (if she does) use your utmost influence to make her give up the idea! Spare her the humiliation, the disappointment, the insult perhaps, to which she may innocently expose herself. For her sake, for my sake, leave no means untried to attain this righteous, this merciful end."

"I send her no message—I dare not do it. Say nothing, when you see her, which can recall me to her memory. On the contrary, help her to forget me as soon as possible. The kindest thing I can do—the one atonement I can make to her—is to drop out of her life."

With those wretched words it ended. I handed his letter back to his mother in silence. She said but little, on her side.

"If this doesn't discourage you," she remarked, slowly folding up the letter, "nothing will. Let us leave it there, and say no more."

I made no answer—I was crying behind my veil. My domestic prospect looked so dreary; my unfortunate husband was so hopelessly misguided, so pitifully wrong! The one chance for both of us, and the one consolation for poor me, was to hold to my desperate resolution more firmly than ever. If I had wanted anything to confirm me in this view, and to arm me against the remonstrances of every one of my friends, Eustace's letter would have proved more than sufficient to answer the purpose. At least, he had not forgotten me; he thought of me, and he mourned the loss of me, every day of his life. That was encouragement enough—for the present. "If Ariel calls for me in the pony-chaise to-morrow," I thought to myself, "with Ariel I go."

Mrs. Macallan set me down at Benjamin's door.

I mentioned to her, at parting—I stood sufficiently in awe of her to put it off till the last moment—that Miserrimus Dexter had arranged to send his cousin and his pony-chaise to her residence, on the next day; and I inquired thereupon whether my mother-in-law would permit me to call at her house to wait for the appearance of the cousin, or whether she would prefer sending the chaise on to Benjamin's cottage. I fully expected an explosion of anger to follow this bold avowal of my plans for the next day. The old lady agreeably surprised me. She proved that she had really taken a liking to me; she kept her temper.

"If you persist in going back to Dexter, you certainly shall not go to him from my door," she said. "But I hope you will not persist. I hope you will wake a wiser woman to-morrow morning."

The morning came. A little before noon, the arrival of the pony-chaise was announced at the door, and a letter was brought in to me from Mrs. Macallan.

"I have no right to control your movements," my mother-in-law wrote. "I send the chaise to Mr. Benjamin's house; and I sincerely trust that you will not take your place in it. I wish I could persuade you, Valeria, how truly I am your friend. I have been thinking about you anxiously in the wakeful hours of the night. How anxiously, you will understand, when I tell you that I now reproach myself for not having done more than I did to prevent your unhappy marriage. And yet, what more I could have done I don't really know. My son admitted to me that he was courting you under an assumed name—but he never told me what the name was, or who you were, or where your friends lived. Perhaps I ought to have taken measures to find this out. Perhaps if I had succeeded I

ought to have interfered and enlightened you, even at the sad sacrifice of making an enemy of my own son. I honestly thought I did my duty in expressing my disapproval, and in refusing to be present at the marriage. Was I too easily satisfied? It is too late to ask. Why do I trouble you with an old woman's vain misgivings and regrets? My child, if you come to any harin, I shall feel (indirectly) responsible for it. It is this uneasy state of mind which sets me writing, with nothing to say that can interest you. Don't go to Dexter! The fear has been pursuing me all night that your going to Dexter will end badly. Write him an excuse, Valeria! I firmly believe you will repent it if you return to that house."

Was ever a woman more plainly warned, more carefully advised, than I? And yet, warning and advice were both thrown away on me!

Let me say for myself that I was really touched by the kindness of my mother-in-law's letter—though I was not shaken by it in the smallest degree. As long as I lived, moved, and thought, my one purpose now was to make Miserrimus Dexter confide to me his ideas on the subject of Mrs. Eustace Macallan's death. To those ideas I looked as my guiding stars along the dark way on which I was going. I wrote back to Mrs. Macallan, as I really felt, gratefully and penitently. And then I went out to the chaise.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MR. DEXTER AT HOME.

I found all the idle boys in the neighbourhood collected round the pony-chaise, expressing, in the occult language of slang, their high enjoyment and appreciation of the appearance of "Ariel" in her man's jacket and hat. The pony was fidgety—he felt the influence of the popular uproar. His driver sat, whip in hand, magnificently impenetrable to jokes and jests that were flying round her. I said "Good morning," on getting into the chaise. Ariel only said "Gee up!"—and started the pony.

I made up my mind to perform the journey to the distant northern suburb in silence. It was evidently useless for me to attempt to speak; and experience informed me that I need not expect to hear a word fall from the lips of my companion. Experience, however, is not always infallible. After driving for half-an-hour in stolid silence, Ariel astounded me by suddenly bursting into speech.

"Do you know what we are coming to?" she asked, keeping her eyes straight between the pony's ears.

"No," I answered. "I don't know the road. What are we coming to?"

"We are coming to a canal."

"Well?"

"Well! I have half a mind to upset you in the canal."

This formidable announcement appeared to me to require some explanation. I took the liberty of asking for it.

"Why should you upset me?" I inquired.

"Because I hate you," was the cool and candid reply.

"What have I done to offend you?" I asked next.

"What do you want with The Master? Ariel asked, in her turn.

"Do you mean Mr. Dexter?"

"Yes."

"I want to have some talk with Mr. Dexter."

"You don't! You want to take my place. You want to brush his hair and oil his beard, instead of me. You wretch!"

I now began to understand. The idea which Miserrimus Dexter had jestingly put into her head, in exhibiting her to us on the previous night, had been ripening slowly in that dull brain, and had found its way outwards into words, about fifteen hours afterwards, under the irritating influence of my presence!

"I don't want to touch his hair or his beard," I said. "I leave that entirely to you."

She looked round at me; her fat face flashing her dull eyes dilating, with the unaccustomed effort to express herself in speech, and to understand what was said to her in return.

"Say that again," she burst out. "And say it slower this time."

I said it again, and I said it slower.

"Swear it!" she cried, getting more and more excited.

I preserved my gravity (the canal was just visible in the distance), and swore it.

"Are you satisfied now?" I asked.

There was no answer. Her last resources of speech were exhausted. The strange creature looked back again straight between the pony's ears; emitted hoarsely a grunt of relief; and never more looked at me, never more spoke to me, for the rest of the journey. We drove past the banks of the canal; and I escaped immersion. We rattled, in our jingling little vehicle, through the streets and across the waste patches of ground, which I dimly remembered in the darkness, and which looked more squalid and more hideous than ever in the broad daylight. The chaise turned down a lane, too narrow for the passage of any larger vehicle, and stopped at a wall and a gate that were new objects to me. Opening the gate with her key, and leading the pony, Ariel introduced me to the back garden and yard of Miserrimus Dexter's rotten and rambling old house. The pony walked off

independently to his stable, with the chaise behind him. My silent companion led me through a bleak and barren kitchen, and along a stone passage. Opening a door at the end, she admitted me to the back of the hall into which Mrs. Macallan and I had penetrated by the front entrance to the house. Here, Ariel lifted a whistle which hung round her neck, and blew the shrill trilling notes, with the sound of which I was already familiar as the means of communication between Miserrimus Dexter and his slave. The whistling over, the slave's unwilling lips struggled into speech, for the last time.

"Wait till you hear The Master's whistle," she said. "Then go upstairs."

So! I was to be whistled for like a dog. And worse still, there was no help for it but to submit like a dog. Had Ariel any excuse to make? Nothing of the sort! She turned her shapeless back on me, and vanished into the kitchen region of the house.

After waiting for a minute or two, and hearing no signal from the floor above, I advanced into the broader and brighter part of the hall, to look by daylight at the pictures which I had only imperfectly discovered in the darkness of the night. A painted inscription in many colours, just under the cornice of the ceiling, informed me that the works on the walls were the production of the all-accomplished Dexter himself. Not satisfied with being poet and composer, he was painter as well. On one wall the subjects were described as "Illustrations of the Passions;" on the other, as "Episodes in the Life of the Wandering Jew." Chance spectators like myself were gravely warned, by means of the inscription, to view the pictures as efforts of pure imagination. "Persons who look for mere Nature in works of Art" (the inscription announced) "are persons to whom Mr. Dexter does not address himself with the brush. He relies entirely on his imagination. Nature puts him out."

Taking due care to dismiss all ideas of Nature from my mind, to begin with, I looked at the pictures which represented the Passions, first.

Little as I knew critically of Art, I could see that Miserrimus Dexter knew still less of the rules of drawing, colour, and composition. His pictures were, in the strictest meaning of that expressive word—Dubs. The diseased and riotous delight of the painter in representing Horrors (with certain exceptions to be hereafter mentioned) the one remarkable quality that I could discover in the series of his works.

The first of the Passion-pictures illustrated Revenge. A corpse, in fancy costume, lay on the bank of a foaming river, under the shade of a giant tree. An infuriated man, also in fancy costume, stood astride over the dead body, with his sword lifted to the lowering sky, and watched, with a horrid expression of delight, the blood of the man whom he had just killed, dripping slowly in a procession of big red drops down the broad blade of his weapon. The next picture illustrated Cruelty, in many compartments. In one, I saw a disembowelled horse savagely spurred on by his rider at a ball fight. In another, an aged philosopher was dissecting a living cat, and gloating over his work. In a third, two Pagans politely congratulated each other on the torture of two saints; one saint was roasting on a gridiron; the other, hung up to a tree by his heels, had been just skinned, and was not quite dead yet. Feeling no great desire, after these specimens, to look at any more of the illustrated Passions, I turned to the opposite wall to be instructed in the career of the Wandering Jew. Here, a second inscription informed me that the painter considered the Dying Dutchman to be no other than the Wandering Jew, pursuing his interminable journey by sea. The marine adventures of this mysterious personage were the adventures chosen for representation by Dexter's brush. The first picture showed me a harbour on a rocky coast. A vessel was at anchor, with the helmsman singing on the deck. The sea in the offing was black and rolling; thunder-clouds lay low on the horizon split by broad flashes of lightning. In the glare of the lightning, heaving and pitching, appeared the misty form of the Phantom Ship approaching the shore. In this work, badly as it was painted, there were really signs of a powerful imagination, and even of a poetical feeling for the supernatural. The next picture showed the Phantom Ship, moored (to the horror and astonishment of the helmsman) behind the earthly vessel in the harbour. The Jew had stepped on shore. His boat was on the beach. His crew—little men with stony white faces, dressed in funeral black—sat in silent rows on the seats of the boat, with their oars in their lean long hands. The Jew, also in black, stood with his eyes and hands raised imploringly to the thunderous heaven. The wild creatures of land and sea—the tiger, the rhinoceros, the crocodile; the sea-serpent, the shark, and the devil-fish, surrounded the accursed Wanderer in a mytic circle, daunted and fascinated at the sight of him. The lightning was gone. The sky and sea had darkened to a great black blank. A faint and lurid light lit the scene, falling downward from a torch, brandished by an avenging Spirit that hovered over the Jew on outspread vulture-wings. Wild as the picture might be in its conception, there was a suggestive power in it which I confess strongly impressed me. The mysterious silence in the house, and my strange position at the moment, no doubt had their effect on my mind. While I was still looking at the ghastly compo-