

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 XXXIII.

A SPECIMEN OF MY FOLLY.

"It is hardly a professional consultation, Mr. Playmore. I find myself in a very painful position; and I come to you to advise me, under very unusual circumstances. I shall surprise you very much when you hear what I have to say; and I am afraid I shall occupy more than my fair share of your time."

"I, and my time, are entirely at your disposal," he said. "Tell me what I can do for you—and tell it in your own way."

The kindness of his language was more than matched by the kindness of his manner. I spoke to him freely and fully—I told him my strange story without the slightest reserve.

He showed the varying impressions that I produced on his mind, without the slightest concealment. My separation from Eustace distressed him. My resolution to dispute the Scotch Verdict, and my unjust suspicions of Mrs. Beauty, first amused, then surprised him. It was not, however, until I had described my extraordinary interview with Miserrimus Dexter, and my hardly less remarkable conversation with Lady Clarinda, that I produced my greatest effect on the lawyer's mind. I saw him change colour for the first time. He started, and muttered to himself, as if he had completely forgotten me. "Good God!" I heard him say—"Can it be possible? Does the truth lie that way, after all?"

I took the liberty of interrupting him. I had no idea of allowing him to keep his thoughts to himself.

"I seem to have surprised you?" I said.

He started at the sound of my voice.

"I beg ten thousand pardons!" he exclaimed. "You have not only surprised me—you have opened an entirely new view to my mind. I see a possibility, a really startling possibility, in connection with the poisoning at Gleninch, which never occurred to me until the present moment. This is a nice state of things," he added, falling back again into his ordinary humour. "Here is the client leading the lawyer. My dear Mrs. Eustace, which is it—do you want my advice? or do I want yours?"

"May I hear the new idea?" I asked.

"Not just yet, if you will excuse me," he answered. "Make allowances for my professional caution. I don't want to be professional with you—my great anxiety is to avoid it. But the lawyer gets the better of the man, and refuses to be suppressed. I really hesitate to realise what is passing in my own mind, without some further inquiry. Do me a great favour. Let us go over a part of the ground again, and let me ask you some questions as we proceed. Do you feel any objection to obliging me in this matter?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Playmore. How far shall we go back?"

"To your visit to Dexter, with your mother-in-law. When you first asked him if he had any ideas of his own, on the subject of Mrs. Eustace Macallan's death, did I understand you to say that he looked at you suspiciously?"

"Very suspiciously."

"And his face cleared up again, when you told him that your question was only suggested by what you had read in the Report of the Trial?"

"Yes."

He drew a slip of paper out of the drawer in his desk, dipped his pen in the ink, considered a little, and placed a chair for me close at his side.

"The lawyer disappears," he said, "and the man resumes his proper place. There shall be no professional mysteries between you and me. As your husband's old friend, Mrs. Eustace, I feel no common interest in you. I see a serious necessity for warning you before it is too late; and I can only do so to any good purpose, by running a risk on which few men in my place would venture. Personally and professionally, I am going to trust you—though I am a Scotchman and a lawyer! Sit here, and look over my shoulder while I make my notes. You will see what is passing in my mind, if you see what I write."

I sat down by him and looked over his shoulder, without the smallest pretence of hesitation.

He began to write, as follows:—

"The poisoning at Gleninch. Queries:—In what position does Miserrimus Dexter stand towards the poisoning? And what does he (presumably) know about that matter?"

"He has ideas which are secrets. He suspects that he has betrayed them, or that they have been discovered in some way, inconceivable to himself. He is palpably relieved when he finds that this is not the case."

The pen stopped; and the questions went on.

"Let us advance to your second visit," said Mr. Playmore, "when you saw Dexter alone. Tell me again what he did, and how he looked, when you informed him that you were not satisfied with the Scotch Verdict."

I repeated what I have already written in these pages. The pen went back to the paper again, and added these lines:—

"He hears nothing more remarkable than that a person visiting him, who is interested in the case, refuses to accept the verdict at the Macallan Trial, as a final verdict, and proposes to re-open the inquiry. What does he do upon that?"

"He exhibits all the symptoms of a panic of terror; he sees himself in some incomprehensible danger; he is frantic at one moment, and servile at the next; he must and will know what this disturbing person really means. And when he is informed on that point, he first turns pale and doubts the evidence of his own senses; and next, with nothing said to justify it, gratuitously accuses his visitor of suspecting somebody; Query, here:—When a small sum of money is missing in a household, and the servants in general are called together to be informed of the circumstance, what do we think of the one servant, in particular, who speaks first, and who says, 'Do you suspect me?'"

He laid down the pen again.

"Is that right?" he asked.

I began to see the end to which the notes were drifting. Instead of answering his question, I entreated him to enter into the explanations that were still wanting to convince my own mind. He held up a warning forefinger, and stopped me.

"Not yet," he said. "Once again, am I right—so far?"

"Quite right."

"Very well. Now tell me what happened next? Don't mind repeating yourself. Give me all the details, one after another, to the end."

I mentioned all the details, exactly as I remembered them. Mr. Playmore returned to his writing for the third and last time. Thus the notes ended:—

"He is indirectly assured that he at least is not the person suspected. He sinks back in his chair; he draws a long breath; he asks to be left awhile by himself, under the pretence that the subject excites him. When the visitor returns, Dexter has been drinking in the interval. The visitor resumes the subject—not Dexter. The visitor is convinced that Mrs. Eustace Macallan died by the hand of a poisoner, and openly says so. Dexter sinks back in his chair like a man fainting. What is the horror that has got possession of him? It is easy to understand, if we call it guilty horror. It is beyond all understanding if we call it anything else. And how does it leave him? He dies from one extreme to another; he is indescribably delighted when he discovers that the visitor's suspicions are all fixed on an absent person. And then, and then only, he takes refuge in the declaration that he has been of one mind with his visitor, in the matter of suspicion, from the first! These are facts. To what plain conclusion do they point?"

He shut up his notes, and, steadily watching my face, waited for me to speak first.

"I understand you, Mr. Playmore," I began impetuously. "You believe that Mr. Dexter—"

His warning forefinger stopped me there.

"Tell me," he interposed, "what Dexter said to you when he was so good as to confirm your opinion of poor Mrs. Beauty?"

"He said, 'There isn't a doubt about it. Mrs. Beauty poisoned her!'"

"I can't do better than follow so good an example—with one trifling difference. I say too, 'There isn't a doubt about it! Dexter poisoned her!'"

"Are you joking, Mr. Playmore?"

"I never was more in earnest in my life. Your rash visit to Dexter, and your extraordinary imprudence in taking him into your confidence, have led to astonishing results. The light which the whole machinery of the Law was unable to throw on the poisoning case at Gleninch, has been accidentally let on it, by a Lady who refuses to listen to reason and who insists on having her own way. Quite incredible, and nevertheless quite true!"

"Impossible!" I exclaimed.

"What is impossible?" he asked coolly.

"That Dexter poisoned my husband's first wife."

"And why is that impossible, if you please?"

I began to be almost enraged with Mr. Playmore.

"Can you ask the question?" I replied indignantly. "I have told you that I heard him speak of her, in terms of respect and affection of which any woman might be proud. He lives in the memory of her. I owe his friendly reception of me to some resemblance which he fancied he sees between my figure and hers. I have seen tears in his eyes, I have heard his voice falter and fail him, when he spoke of her. He may be the falsest of men in all besides; but he is true to her—he has not misled me in that one thing. There are signs that never deceive a woman, when a man is talking to her of what is really near his heart. I saw those signs. It is as true that I poisoned her, as that he did. I am ashamed to set my opinion against yours, Mr. Playmore; but I really cannot help it. I declare I am almost angry with you!"

He seemed to be pleased, instead of offended, by the bold manner in which I expressed myself.

"My dear Mrs. Eustace, you have no reason to be angry with me! In one respect, I entirely share your view—with this difference, that I go a little farther than you do."

"I don't understand you."

"You will understand me directly. You describe Dexter's feeling for the late Mrs. Eustace,

as a happy mixture of respect and affection. I can tell you, it was a much warmer feeling towards her than that. I have my information from the poor lady herself—who, honoured me with her confidence and friendship for the best part of her life. Before she married Mr. Macallan—she kept it a secret from him, and you had better keep it a secret too—Miserrimus Dexter was in love with her. Miserrimus Dexter asked her—deformed as he was, seriously asked her—to be his wife."

"And in the face of that," I cried, "you say that he poisoned her!"

"I do. I see no other conclusion possible, after what happened during your visit to him? You all but frightened him into a fainting-fit. What was he afraid of?"

I tried hard to find an answer to that. I even embarked on an answer, without quite knowing where my own words might lead me.

"Mr. Dexter is an old and true friend of my husband's," I began. "When he heard me say I was not satisfied with the verdict, he might have felt alarmed—"

"He might have felt alarmed at the possible consequences to your husband of re-opening the inquiry," said Mr. Playmore, ironically finishing the sentence for me. "Rather far-fetched. Mrs. Eustace! and not very consistent with your faith in your husband's innocence! Clear your mind of one mistake," he continued seriously, "which may fatally mislead you, if you persist in pursuing your present course. Miserrimus Dexter, you may take my word for it, ceased to be your husband's friend on the day when your husband married his first wife. Dexter has kept up appearances, I grant you—both in public and in private. His evidence in his friend's favour at the Trial, was given with the deep feeling which everybody expected from him. Nevertheless I firmly believe, looking under the surface, that Mr. Macallan has no bitterer enemy living than Miserrimus Dexter."

He turned me cold. I felt that here, at least, he was right. My husband had wooed and won the woman who had refused Dexter's offer of marriage. Was Dexter the man to forgive that? My own experience answered me—and said No.

"Bear in mind, what I have told you," Mr. Playmore proceeded. "And now let us set on to your own position in this matter, and to the interests that you have at stake. Try to adopt my point of view for the moment; and let us inquire what chance we have of making any farther advance towards a discovery of the truth. It is one thing to be morally convinced (as I am) that Miserrimus Dexter is the man who ought to have been tried for the murder at Gleninch; and it is another thing, at this distance of time, to lay our hands on the plain evidence which can alone justify anything like a public assertion of his guilt. There, as I see it, is the insuperable difficulty in the case. Unless I am completely mistaken, the question is now narrowed to this plain issue:—The public assertion of your husband's innocence depends entirely on the public assertion of Dexter's guilt. How are you to arrive at that result? There is not a particle of evidence against him. You can only convict Dexter, on Dexter's own confession. Are you listening to me?"

I was listening, most unwillingly. If he was right, things had indeed come to that terrible pass. But I could not—with all my respect for his superior knowledge and experience—I could not persuade myself that he was right. And I owned it, with the humility which I really felt.

He smiled good-humouredly. "At any rate," he said, "you will admit that Dexter has not freely opened his mind to you, thus far? He is still keeping something from your knowledge, which you are interested in discovering?"

"Yes, I admit that."

"Very good. What applies to your view of the case, applies to mine. I say, he is keeping from you the confession of his guilt. You say, he is keeping from you information which may fasten the guilt on some other person. Let us start from that point. Confession, or information, how are you to get at what he is now withholding from you? What influence can you bring to bear on him, when you see him again?"

"Surely, I might persuade him?"

"Certainly. And if persuasion fails—what then? Do you think you can entrap him into speaking out? or terrify him into speaking out?"

"If you will look at your notes, Mr. Playmore, you will see that I have already succeeded in terrifying him—though I am only a woman, and though I didn't mean to do it."

"Very well answered! You mark the trick. What you have done once, you think you can do again. Well! as you are determined to try the experiment, it can do you no harm to know a little more of Dexter's character and temperament than you know now. Suppose we apply for information to somebody who can help us?"

I started, and looked round the room. He made me do it: he spoke as if the person who was to help us was close at our elbows.

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "The oracle is silent; and the oracle is here."

He unlocked one of the drawers of his desk; produced a bundle of letters; and picked out one.

"When we were arranging your husband's

defence," he said. "We felt some difficulty about including Miserrimus Dexter among our witnesses. We had not the slightest suspicion of him—I need hardly tell you. But we were all afraid of his eccentricity; and some among us even feared that the excitement of appearing at the Trial might drive him completely out of his mind. In this emergency, we applied to a doctor to help us. Under some pretext which I forget now, we introduced him to Dexter. And in due course of time we received his report. Here it is."

He opened the letter; and, marking a certain passage in it with a pencil, handed it to me.

"Read the lines which I have marked," he said; "they will be quite sufficient for our purpose."

I read these words:—

"Summing up the results of my observation, I may give it as my opinion that there is undoubtedly latent insanity in this case; but that no active symptoms of madness have presented themselves as yet. You may, I think, produce him at the Trial, without fear of consequences. He may say and do all sorts of odd things; but he has his mind under the control of his will, and you may trust his self-esteem to exhibit him in the character of a substantially intelligent witness."

"As to the future, I am, of course, not able to speak positively. I can only state my views."

"That he will end in madness (if he lives), I entertain little or no doubt. The question of when the madness will show itself, depends entirely on the state of his health. His nervous system is highly sensitive; and there are signs that his way of life has already damaged it. If he conquers the bad habits to which I have alluded in an earlier part of my report, and if he passes many hours of every day quietly in the open air, he may last as a sane man for years to come. If he persists in his present way of life—or, in other words, if further mischief occurs to that sensitive nervous system—his lapse into insanity must infallibly take place when the mischief has reached its culminating point. Without warning to himself or to others, the whole mental structure will give way; and, at a moment's notice, while he is acting as quietly or speaking as intelligently as at his best times, the man will drop (if I may use the expression) into madness or idiocy. In either case, when the catastrophe has happened, it is only due to his friends to add, that they can (as I believe) entertain no hope of his cure. The balance once lost, will be lost for life."

There it ended. Mr. Playmore put the letter back in his drawer.

"You have just read the opinion of one of our highest living authorities," he said. "Does Dexter strike you as a likely man to give his nervous system a chance of recovery? Do you see no obstacles and no perils in your way?"

My silence answered him.

"Suppose you go back to Dexter," he proceeded. "And suppose that the doctor's opinion exaggerates the peril, in his case. What are you to do? The last time you saw him, you had the immense advantage of taking him by surprise. Those sensitive nerves of his gave way; and he betrayed the fear that you roused in him. Can you take him by surprise again? Not you! He is prepared for you now; and he will be on his guard. If you encounter nothing worse, you will have his cunning to deal with, next. Are you his match at that? But for Lady Clarinda, he would have hopelessly misled you on the subject of Mrs. Beauty."

There was no answering this, either. I was foolish enough to try to answer it, for all that.

"He told me the truth, so far as he knew it."

I rejoined. "He really saw, what he said he saw, in the corridor at Gleninch."

"He told you the truth," returned Mr. Playmore, "because he was cunning enough to see that the truth would help him in irritating your suspicions. You don't really believe that he shared your suspicions?"

"Why not?" I said. "He was as ignorant of what Mrs. Beauty was really doing on that night, as I was—until I met Lady Clarinda. It remains to be seen, whether he will not be as much astonished as I was, when I tell him what Lady Clarinda told me."

This smart reply produced an effect which I had not anticipated.

To my surprise, Mr. Playmore abruptly dropped all further discussion on his side. He appeared to despair of convincing me, and he owned it indirectly in his next words.

"Will nothing that I can say to you," he asked, "induce you to think as I think in this matter?"

"I have not your ability, or your experience," I answered. "I am sorry to say, I can't think as you think."

"And you are really determined to see Miserrimus Dexter again?"

"I have engaged myself to see him again."

He waited a little, and thought over it.

"You have honoured me by asking for my advice," he said. "I earnestly advise you, Mrs. Eustace, to break your engagement. I go even further than that. I entreat you not to see Dexter again."

Just what my mother-in-law had said! Just what Benjamin and Major Fitz-David had said! They were all against me. And still I held out. I wonder, when I look back at it, at my own obstinacy. I am almost ashamed to relate that I made Mr. Playmore no reply. He waited, still looking at me. I felt irritated by that fixed look.