

THE LAW AND THE LADY: A NOVEL.

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(From Author's MS. and Advance Sheets)

ENTREED according to Act of Parliament of Canada, in the year 1874, by WILKIE COLLINS, in the Office of the Minister of Agriculture.

PART II.—PARADISE REGAINED.

CHAPTER XLIX.

PAST AND FUTURE.

"Questions of the Second Group: relating to the Wife's Confession. First Question:—What prevented Dexter from destroying the letter, when he first discovered it under the dead woman's pillow?"

"Answer:—The same motives which led him to resist the seizure of the Diary, and to give his evidence in the prisoner's favour at the Trial, induced him to preserve the letter, until the verdict was known. Looking back once more at his last words, as taken down by Mr. Benjamin, we may infer that if the verdict had been Guilty, he would not have hesitated to save the innocent husband by producing the wife's confession. There are degrees in all wickedness. Dexter was wicked enough to suppress the letter, which wounded his vanity by revealing him as an object for loathing and contempt—but he was not on the scaffold. He was capable of exposing the rival whom he hated to the infamy and torture of a public accusation of murder; but, in the event of an adverse verdict, he shrank before the dire cruelty of letting him be hanged. Reflect, in this connection, on what he must have suffered, villain as he was, when he first read the wife's confession. He had calculated on undermining her affection for her husband—and whither had his calculations led him? He had driven the woman whom he loved to the last dreadful refuge of death by suicide! Give these considerations their due weight; and you will understand that some little redeeming virtue might show itself, as the result even of this man's remorse."

"Second Question:—What motive influenced Miserrimus Dexter's conduct, when Mrs. (Valeria) Macellan informed him that she proposed re-opening the inquiry into the poisoning at Gleninch?"

"Answer:—In all probability, Dexter's guilty fears suggested to him that he might have been watched, on the morning when he secretly entered the chamber in which the first Mrs. Eustace lay dead. Feeling no scruples himself, to restrain him from listening at doors and looking through keyholes, he would be all the more ready to suspect other people of the same practices. With this dread in him, it would naturally occur to his mind that Mrs. Valeria might meet with the person who had watched him, and might hear all that the person had discovered—unless he led her astray at the outset of her investigations. Her own jealous suspicions of Mrs. Beaulieu offered him the chance of easily doing this. And he was all the readier to profit by the chance, being himself animated by the most hostile feeling towards that lady. He knew her, as the enemy who destroyed the domestic peace of the mistress of the house; he loved the mistress of the house—and he hated her enemy, accordingly. The preservation of his guilty secret, and the persecution of Mrs. Beaulieu; there you have the greater and the lesser motive of his conduct, in his relations with Mrs. Eustace the second!"

Benjamin laid down his notes, and took off his spectacles.

"We have not thought it necessary to go further than this," he said. "Is there any point you can think of that is still left unexplained?"

"I reflected. There was no point of any importance left unexplained that I could remember. But there was one little matter, suggested by the recent allusions to Mr. Beaulieu, which I wished, if possible, to have thoroughly cleared up."

"Have you and Mr. Playmore ever spoken together on the subject of my husband's former attachment to Mrs. Beaulieu?" I asked. "Has Mr. Playmore ever told you why Eustace did not marry her, after the Trial?"

"I put that question to Mr. Playmore myself," said Benjamin. "He answered it easily enough. Being your husband's confidential friend and adviser, he was consulted when Mr. Eustace wrote to Mrs. Beaulieu, after the Trial; and he repeated the substance of the letter, at my request. Would you like to hear what I remember of it, in my turn?"

I owned that I should like to hear it. What Benjamin thereupon told me, exactly coincided with what Miserrimus Dexter had told me—as related in the thirtieth chapter of my narrative. Mrs. Beaulieu had been a witness of the public degradation of my husband. That was enough in itself to prevent him from marrying her. He broke off with her, for the same reason which had led him to separate himself from me. Existence with a woman who knew that he had been tried for his life as a murderer, was an existence which he had not resolution enough to face. The two accounts agreed in every particular. At last my jealous curiosity was pacified; and Benjamin was free to dismiss the past

from further consideration, and to approach the more critical and more interesting topic of the future.

His first inquiries related to Eustace. He asked if my husband had any suspicion of the proceedings which had taken place at Gleninch.

I told him what had happened, and how I had contrived to put off the inevitable disclosure for a time.

My old friend's face cleared up as he listened to me.

"This will be good news for Mr. Playmore," he said. "Our excellent friend, the lawyer, is sorely afraid that our discoveries may compromise your position with your husband. On the one hand, he is naturally anxious to spare Mr. Eustace the distress which he must certainly feel, if he reads his first wife's confession. On the other hand, it is impossible, in justice, as Mr. Playmore puts it, to the unborn children of your marriage, to suppress a document which vindicates the memory of their father from the aspersion that the Scotch Verdict might otherwise cast on it."

I listened attentively. Benjamin had touched on a trouble which was still secretly preying on my mind.

"How does Mr. Playmore propose to meet the difficulty?" I asked.

"He can only meet it in one way," Benjamin replied. "He proposes to seal up the original manuscript of the letter, and to add to it a plain statement of the circumstances under which it was discovered; supported by your signed attestation and mine, as witnesses to the facts. This done, he must leave it to you to take your husband into your confidence, at your own time. It will then be for Mr. Eustace to decide whether he will leave it with the seal unbroken, as an heirloom to his children, to be made public or not, at their discretion, when they are of age to think for themselves. Do you consent to this, my dear? or would you prefer that Mr. Playmore should see your husband, and act for you in the matter?"

I decided, without hesitation, to take the responsibility on myself. Where the question of guiding Eustace's decision was concerned, I considered my influence to be decidedly superior to the influence of Mr. Playmore. My choice met with Benjamin's full approval. He arranged to write to Edinburgh, and relieve the lawyer's anxieties by that day's post.

The one last thing now left to be settled, related to our plans for returning to England. The doctors were the authorities on this subject. I promised to consult them about it, at their next visit to Eustace.

"Have you anything more to say to me?" Benjamin inquired, as he opened his writing-case.

I thought of Miserrimus Dexter and Ariel; and I inquired if he had heard any news of them lately. My old friend sighed, and warned me that I had touched on a painful subject.

"The best thing that can happen to that unhappy man, is likely to happen," he said. "The one change in him is a change that threatens paralysis. You may hear of his death before you get back to England."

"And Ariel?" I asked.

"Quite unaltered," Benjamin answered. "Perfectly happy so long as she is with 'the Master.' From all I can hear of her, poor soul, she doesn't reckon Dexter among mortal beings. She laughs at the idea of his dying; and she waits patiently, in the firm persuasion that he will recognise her again."

Benjamin's news saddened and silenced me. I left him to his letter.

CHAPTER L.

THE LAST OF THE STORY.

In ten days more we returned to England, accompanied by Benjamin.

Mrs. Macellan's house in London offered us ample accommodation. We gladly availed ourselves of her proposal, when she invited us to stay with her until our child was born, and our plans for the future were arranged.

The sad news from the asylum (for which Benjamin had prepared my mind at Paris) reached me soon after our return to England. Miserrimus Dexter's release from the burden of life had come to him, by slow degrees. A few hours before he breathed his last, he rallied for awhile, and recognised Ariel at his bedside. He feebly pronounced her name, and looked at her, and asked for me. They thought of sending for me, but it was too late. Before the messenger could be despatched, he said with a touch of his old self-importance, "Silence all of you! my brains are weary; I am going to sleep." He closed his eyes in slumber, and never woke again. So for this man too the end came mercifully, without grief or pain. So that strange and many-sided life—with its guilt and its misery, its fitful flashes of poetry and humour, its fantastic gaiety, cruelty, and vanity—ran its destined course, and faded out like a dream!

Alas for Ariel! She had lived for the Master—what more could she do, now the Master was gone? She could die for him.

They had mercifully allowed her to attend the funeral of Miserrimus Dexter—in the hope that the ceremony might avail to convince her of his death. The anticipation was not realised; she still persisted in denying that "the Master" had left her. They were obliged to restrain the poor creature by force, when the coffin was

lowered into the grave; and they could only remove her from the cemetery, by the same means, when the burial service was over. From that time, her life alternated, for a few weeks, between fits of raving delirium, and intervals of lethargic repose. At the annual ball given in the asylum, when the strict superintendence of the patients was in some degree relaxed, the alarm was raised, a little before midnight, that Ariel was missing. The nurse in charge had left her asleep, and had yielded to the temptation of going downstairs to look at the dancing. When the woman returned to her post, Ariel was gone. The presence of strangers, and the confusion incidental to the festival, offered her facilities for escaping which would not have presented themselves at any other time. That night the search for her proved to be useless. The next morning brought with it the last touching and terrible tidings of her. She had strayed back to the burial-ground; and she had been found towards sunrise, dead of cold and exposure, on Miserrimus Dexter's grave. Faithful to the last, Ariel had followed the Master! Faithful to the last, Ariel had died on the Master's grave!

Having written these sad words, I turn willingly to a less painful theme.

Events had separated me from Major Fitz-David, after the date of the dinner-party which had witnessed my memorable meeting with Lady Clarinda. From that time, I heard little or nothing of the Major; and I am ashamed to say I had almost entirely forgotten him—when I was reminded of the modern Don Juan, by the amazing appearance of wedding-cards, addressed to me at my mother-in-law's house! The Major had settled in life at last. And, more wonderful still, the Major had chosen as the lawful ruler of his household and himself—"the future Queen of Song;" the round-eyed over-dressed young lady with the strident soprano voice!

We paid our visit of congratulation in due form; and we really did feel for Major Fitz-David.

The ordeal of marriage had so changed my gay and gallant admirer of former times, that I hardly knew him again. He had lost all his pretensions to youth; he had become, hopelessly and undisguisedly, an old man. Standing behind the chair on which his imperious young wife sat enthroned, he looked at her submissively between every two words that he addressed to me, as if he waited for her permission to open his lips and speak. Whenever she interrupted him—and she did it, over and over again, without ceremony—he submitted with a senile docility and admiration, at once absurd and shocking to see.

"Isn't she beautiful?" he said to me (in his wife's hearing). "What a figure and what a voice! You remember her voice? It's a loss, my dear lady, and irretrievable loss, to the operatic stage! Do you know, when I think what that grand creature might have done, I sometimes ask myself if I really had any right to marry her, I feel, upon my honour I feel, as if I had committed a fraud on the public!"

As for the favoured object of this quaint mixture of admiration and regret, she was pleased to receive me graciously, as an old friend. While Eustace was talking to the Major, the bride drew me aside out of their hearing, and explained her motives for marrying, with a candour which was positively shameless.

"You see we are a large family at home, quite unprovided for!" this odious young woman whispered in my ear. "It's all very well to talk about my being a 'Queen of Song' and the rest of it. Lord bless you, I have been often enough to the opera, and I have learnt enough of my music-master, to know what it takes to me a fine singer. I haven't the patience to work at it as those foreign women do: a parcel of brazen-faced Jezebels—I hate them. No! no! between you and me, it was a great deal easier to get the money by marrying the old gentleman. Here I am, provided for—and there's all my family provided for, too,—and nothing to do but to spend the money. I am fond of my family: I'm a good daughter and sister—I am! See how I'm dressed; look at the furniture; I haven't played my cards badly, have I? It's a great advantage to marry an old man—you can twist him round your little finger. Happy? Oh, yes! I'm quite happy; and I hope you are, too. Where are you living now? I shall call soon, and have a long gossip with you. I always had a sort of liking for you, and (now I'm as good as you are) I want to be friends."

I made a short and civil reply to this; determining inwardly that when she did visit me, she should get no farther than the house-door. I don't scruple to say that I was thoroughly disgusted with her. When a woman sells herself to a man, that vile bargain is none the less infamous (to my mind), because it happens to be made under the sanction of the Church and the Law.

As I sat at the desk thinking, the picture of the Major and his wife vanishes from my memory—and the last scene in my story comes slowly into view.

He places in my bedroom. The persons (both if you will be pleased to excuse them, in bed) are myself and my son. He is already three weeks old; and he is now lying fast asleep by his mother's side. My good Uncle Starkweather is coming to London to baptise him, Mrs. Mac-

ellan will be his godmother; and his godfathers will be Benjamin and Mr. Playmore. I wonder whether my christening will pass off more merrily than my wedding?

The doctor has just left the house, in some little perplexity about me. He has found me reclining as usual (latterly) in my arm-chair; but, on this particular day, he has detected symptoms of exhaustion, which he finds quite unaccountable under the circumstances, and which warn him to exert his authority by sending me back to my bed.

The truth is that I have not taken the doctor into my confidence. There are two causes for those signs of exhaustion which have surprised my medical attendant—and the names of them are: Anxiety and Suspense.

On this day, I have at last summoned courage enough to perform the promise which I made to my husband in Paris. He is informed, by this time, how his wife's confession was discovered. He knows (on Mr. Playmore's authority), that the letter may be made the means, if he so wills it, of publicly vindicating his innocence in a Court of Law. And, last and most important of all, he is now aware that the Confession itself has been kept a sealed secret from him, out of compassionate regard for his own peace of mind, as well as for the memory of the unhappy woman who was once his wife.

These necessary disclosures I have communicated to my husband—not by word of mouth; when the time came, I shrank from speaking to him personally of his first wife—but by a written statement of the circumstances, taken mainly out of my letters received in Paris, from Benjamin and Mr. Playmore. He has now had ample time to read all that I have written to him, and to reflect on it in the retirement of his own study. I am waiting, with the fatal letter in my hand—and my mother-in-law is waiting in the next room to me—to hear from his own lips whether he decides to break the seal or not.

The minutes pass; and still we fail to hear his footstep on the stairs. My doubts as to which way his decision may turn, affect me more and more uneasily the longer I wait. The very possession of the letter, in the present excited state of my nerves, oppresses and revolts me. I shrink from touching it, or looking at it. I move it about restlessly from place to place on the bed, and still I cannot keep it out of mind. At last, an odd fancy strikes me. I lift up one of the baby's hands, and put the letter under it—and so associate that dreadful record of sin and misery with something innocent and pretty that seems to hallow and to purify it.

The minutes pass; the half-hour longer strikes from the clock on the chimney-piece; and at last I hear him! He knocks softly and opens the door.

He is deadly pale; I fancy I can detect traces of tears on his cheeks. But no outward signs of agitation escape him, as he takes his seat by my side. I can see that he has waited until he could control himself—for my sake.

He takes my hand, and kisses me tenderly. "Valeria!" he says. "Let me once more ask you to forgive what I said, and did, in the bygone time. If I understand nothing else, my love, I understand this:—The proof of my innocence has been found; and I owe it entirely to the courage and the devotion of my wife!"

I wait a little, to enjoy the full luxury of hearing him say those words—to revel in the love and gratitude that moisten his dear eyes as they look at me. Then, I rouse my resolution, and put the momentous question on which our future depends.

"Do you wish to see the letter, Eustace?" Instead of answering directly, he questions me in his turn.

"Have got the letter here?"

"Yes."

"Sealed up?"

"Sealed up."

He waits a little, considering what he is to say next, before he says it.

"Let me be sure that I know exactly what it is I have to decide," he proceeds. "Suppose I insist on reading the letter—?"

There I interrupt him. I know it is my duty to restrain myself. But I cannot do my duty.

"My darling, don't talk of reading the letter! Pray, pray spare yourself—"

He holds up his hand for silence.

"I am not thinking of myself," he says. "I am thinking of my dead wife. If I give up the public vindication of my innocence, in my own life-time—if I leave the seal of the letter unbroken—do you say, as Mr. Playmore says, that I shall be acting mercifully and tenderly towards the memory of my wife?"

"Oh, Eustace, there cannot be the shadow of a doubt of it!"

"Shall I be making some little atonement for any pain that I may have thoughtlessly caused her to suffer in her lifetime?"

"Yes! yes!"

"And, Valeria—shall I please You?"

"My darling, you will enchant me!"

"Where is the letter?"

"In your son's hand, Eustace."

He goes round to the other side of the bed, and lifts the baby's little pink hand to his lips. For a while, he waits so, in sad and secret communion with himself. I see his mother softly open the door, and watch him as I am watching him. In a moment more, our suspense is at an end. With a heavy sigh, he lays the child's hand back again on the sealed letter; and, by

* Note by the writer of the narrative:—

Look back for a further illustration of this point of view to the scene at Benjamin's house (Chapter XXXV.), where Dexter, in a moment of ungovernable agitation, betrays his own secret to Valeria.