

THE LAW AND THE LADY: A NOVEL.

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(From Author's MS. and Advance Sheets)

(NOTE.—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 XXIV.

MISERRIMUS DEXTER—FIRST VIEW.

But not! He refused the proposal of the enterprising speculators, by letter, in these words: "My house is a standing monument of the picturesque and beautiful, amid the mean, dishonest, and grovelling constructions of a mean, dishonest, and grovelling age. I keep my house, gentlemen, as a useful lesson to you. Look at it, while you are building round me—and blush, if you can, for your own work." Was there ever such an absurd letter written yet? Hush! I hear footsteps in the garden. Here comes his cousin. His cousin is a woman. I may as well tell you that, or you might mistake her for a man, in the dark.

A rough, deep voice, which I should certainly never have supposed to be the voice of a woman, hailed us from the inner side of the paling.

"Who's there?"

"Mrs. Macallan," answered my mother-in-law.

"What do you want?"

"We want to see Dexter."

"You can't see him."

"Why not?"

"What did you say your name was?"

"Macallan," Mrs. Macallan. "Eustace Macallan's mother. Now do you understand?"

The voice muttered and grumbled behind the paling, and a key turned in the lock of the gate.

Admitted to the garden, in the deep shadow of the shrubs, I could see nothing distinctly of the woman with the rough voice, except that she wore a man's hat. Closing the gate behind us, without a word of welcome or explanation, she led the way to the house. Mrs. Macallan followed her easily, knowing the place; and I walked in Mrs. Macallan's footsteps as closely as I could. "This is a nice family," my mother-in-law whispered to me. "Dexter's cousin is the only woman in the house—and Dexter's cousin is an idiot."

We entered a spacious hall, with a low ceiling—dimly lit at its farther end by one small oil lamp. I could see that there were pictures on the grim brown walls—but the subjects represented were invisible in the obscure and shadowy light.

Mrs. Macallan addressed herself to the speechless cousin, with the man's hat.

"Now, tell me," she said. "Why can't we see Dexter?"

The cousin took a sheet of paper off the hall table, and handed it to Mrs. Macallan.

"The Master's writing!" said this strange creature, in a hoarse whisper, as if the bare idea of "the Master" terrified her. "Read it. And stay, or go, which you please."

She opened an invisible side-door in the wall, masked by one of the pictures—disappeared through it, like a ghost—and left us together alone in the hall.

Mrs. Macallan approached the oil lamp, and looked by its light at the sheet of paper which the woman had given to her. I followed, and peeped over her shoulder, without ceremony. The paper exhibited written characters, traced in a wonderfully large and firm handwriting. Had I caught the infection of madness in the air of the house? Or did I really see before me these words?

"Notre—My immense imagination is at work. Visions of heroes unroll themselves before me. I re-animate in myself the spirits of the departed great. My brains are boiling in my head. Any persons who disturb me, under existing circumstances, will do it at the peril of their lives.—DEXTER."

Mrs. Macallan looked round at me quietly with her sardonic smile.

"Do you still persist in wanting to be introduced to him?" she asked.

The mockery in the tone of the question roused my pride. I determined that I would not be the first to give way.

"Not if I am putting you in peril of your life, madam," I answered, partly enough, pointing to the paper in her hand.

My mother-in-law returned to the hall-table, and put the paper back on it, without condescending to reply. She then led the way to an arched recess on our right-hand, beyond which I dimly discerned a broad flight of oaken stairs.

"Follow me," said Mrs. Macallan, mounting the stairs in the dark. "I know where to find him."

CHAPTER XXIV. (Continued).

MISERRIMUS DEXTER—FIRST VIEW.

We groped our way up the stairs to the first landing. The next flight of steps, turning in the reverse direction, was faintly illuminated like the hall below, by one oil lamp, placed in some invisible position above us. Ascending the second flight of stairs, and crossing a short corridor, we discovered the lamp, through the open door of a quaintly-shaped circular room, burn-

ing on the mantelpiece. Its light illuminated a strip of thick tapestry, hanging loose from the ceiling to the floor, on the wall opposite to the door by which we had entered.

Mrs. Macallan drew aside the strip of tapestry, and signing to me to follow her, passed behind it.

"Listen!" she whispered.

Standing on the inner side of the tapestry, I found myself in a dark recess or passage, at the end of which a ray of light from the lamp showed me a closed door. I listened, and heard, on the other side of the door, a shouting voice, accompanied by an extraordinary rumbling and whistling sound travelling backwards and forwards, as well as I could judge, over a great space. Now the rumbling and the whistling would reach their climax of loudness, and would overcome the resonant notes of the shouting voice. Then, again, those louder sounds gradually retreated into distance, and the shouting voice made itself heard as the more audible sound of the two. The door must have been of prodigious solidity. Listen as intently as I might, I failed to catch the articulate words (if any) which the voice was pronouncing, and I was equally at a loss to penetrate the cause which produced the rumbling and whistling sounds.

"What can possibly be going on," I whispered to Mrs. Macallan, "on the other side of that door?"

"Stop softly," my mother-in-law answered—and came and saw.

She arranged the tapestry behind us, so as completely to shut out the light in the circular room. Then, noiselessly turning the handle, she opened the heavy door.

We kept ourselves concealed in the shadow of the recess, and looked through the open doorway.

I saw (or fancied I saw, in the obscurity,) a long room, with a low ceiling. The dying gleam of an ill-kept fire formed the only light by which I could judge of objects and distances. Redly illuminating the central portion of the room, opposite to which we were standing, the fire-light left the extremities shadowed in almost total darkness. I had barely time to notice this, before I heard the rumbling and whistling sounds approaching me. A high chair and wheels moved by, through the field of red light, carrying a shadowy figure with flowing hair, and arms furiously raised and lowered, working the machinery that propelled the chair at its utmost rate of speed.

"I am Napoleon," at the summit of audacity!" shouted the man in the chair as he swept past me, on his rumbling and whistling wheels, in the red glow of the firelight. "I give the world; and thrones rock, and kings fall, and nations tremble, and men by tens of thousands light and bleed and die!" The chair rushed out of sight, and the shouting man in it became another hero. "I am Nelson!" the ringing voice cried now. "I am leading the fleet at Trafalgar. I issue my commands, prophetically conscious of victory and death. I see my own apotheosis—my public funeral, my nation's tears, my burial in the glorious church. The ages remember me, and the poets sing my praise in immortal verse!" The strident wheels turned at the far end of the room, and came back. The fantastic and frightful apparition, man and machinery blended in one—the new Centaur, half man, half chair—flew by me again in the dying light. "I am Shakespeare!" cried the frantic creature, now. "I am writing Lear, the tragedy of tragedies. Ancients and moderns, I am the poet who towers over them all. Light! light! the lines flow out like lava from the eruption of my volcanic mind. Light! light! for the poet of all time to write the words that live for ever!" He ground and tore his way back towards the middle of the room. As he approached the fire-place, a last morsel of unburnt coal (or wood) burst into momentary flame, and showed the open doorway. In that moment, he saw us! The wheel-chair stopped with a shock that shook the crazy old floor of the room, altered its course, and flew at us with the rush of a wild animal. We drew back, just in time to escape it, against the wall of the recess. The chair passed on, and burst aside the hanging tapestry. The light of the lamp in the circular room poured in through the gap. The creature in the chair checked his furious wheels, and looked back over his shoulder with an inquisitive curiosity horrible to see.

"Have I run over them? Have I ground them to powder for presuming to intrude on me?" he said to himself. As the expression of this amiable doubt passed his lips, his eyes lighted on us. His mind instantly veered back again to Shakespeare and King Lear. "Gononil and Regan!" he cried. "My two unnatural daughters, my she-devil children, come to mock at me!"

"Nothing of the sort," said my mother-in-law, as quietly as if she were addressing a perfectly reasonable being. "I am your old friend, Mrs. Macallan, and I have brought Eustace Macallan's second wife to see you."

The instant she pronounced those last words, "Eustace Macallan's second wife," the man in the chair sprang out of it with a shrill cry of horror, as if she had shot him. For one moment we saw a head and body in the air, absolutely deprived of the lower limbs. The moment after the terrible creature touched the floor as lightly as a monkey, on his hands. The grotesque horror of the scene culminated in the hopping away, on his hands, at a prodigious speed, until he reached the fire-place in the long room. There he crouched over the dying em-

bers, shuddering and shivering, and muttering, "Oh, pity me, pity me!" dozens and dozens of times to himself.

This was the man whose advice I had come to ask—whose assistance I had confidently counted on in my hour of need.

CHAPTER XXV.

MISERRIMUS DEXTER—SECOND VIEW.

Thoroughly disheartened and disgusted, and—if I must honestly confess it—thoroughly frightened too, I whispered to Mrs. Macallan, "I was wrong, and you were right. Let us go."

The ears of Miserrimus Dexter must have been as sensitive as the ears of a dog. He heard me say, "Let us go."

"No!" he called out. "Bring Eustace Macallan's second wife in here. I am a gentleman—I must apologise to her. I am a student of human character—I wish to see her."

The whole man appeared to have undergone a complete transformation. He spoke in the gentlest of voices, and he sighed hysterically when he had done, like a woman recovering from a burst of tears. Was it reviving courage or reviving curiosity? When Mrs. Macallan said to me, "The fit is over now, do you still wish to go away?"—I answered, "No, I am ready to go in."

"Have you recovered your belief in him already?" asked my mother-in-law in her mercilessly satirical way.

"I have recovered from my terror of him," I replied.

"I am sorry I terrified you," said the soft voice at the fire-place. "Some people think I am a little mad at times. You came, I suppose, at one of the times, if some people are right. I admit that I am a visionary. My imagination runs away with me, and I say and do strange things. On those occasions, anybody who reminds me of that horrible Trial, throws me back again into the past, and causes me unutterable nervous suffering. I am a tender-hearted man. As the necessary consequence (in such a world as this) I am a miserable wretch. Accept my excuses. Come in, both of you. Come in, and pity me."

A child would not have been frightened at him now. A child would have gone in, and patted him.

The room was getting darker and darker. We could just see the crouching figure of Miserrimus Dexter at the expiring fire—and that was all.

"Are we to have no light?" asked Mrs. Macallan. "And is this lady to see you, when the light comes in, out of your chair?"

He lifted something bright and metallic, hanging round his neck, and blew on it a series of shrill, trilling, bird-like notes. After an interval he was answered by a similar series of notes, sounding faintly in some distant region of the house.

"Ariel is coming," he said. "Compose yourself, Mama Macallan. Ariel will make me presentable to a lady's eyes."

He hopped away on his hands into the darkness at the end of the room. "Wait a little," said Mrs. Macallan, "and you will have another surprise—you will see the delicate Ariel!"

We heard heavy footsteps in the circular room.

"Ariel!" sighed Miserrimus Dexter out of the darkness, in his softest notes.

To my astonishment, the coarse masculine voice of the cousin in the man's hat—the Caliban's, rather than the Ariel's voice—answered, "Here!"

"My chair, Ariel!"

The person thus strangely misnamed drew aside the tapestry, so as to let in more light—then entered the room, pushing the wheeled chair before her. She stooped, and lifted Miserrimus Dexter from the floor, like a child. Before she could put him into the chair, he sprang out of her arms with a little gleeful cry, and alighted on his seat, like a bird alighting on its perch!

"The lamp," said Miserrimus Dexter. "And the looking-glass. Pardon me," he added, addressing us, "for turning my back on you. You mustn't see me until my hair is set to-rights. Ariel! the brush, the comb, and the perfumes."

Carrying the lamp in one hand, the looking-glass in the other, and the brush (with the comb stuck in it) between her teeth, Ariel the Second otherwise Dexter's cousin, presented herself plainly before me for the first time. I could now see the girl's round fleshy inexpressive face, her rayless and colourless eyes, her coarse nose and heavy chin. A creature half alive; an imperfectly-developed animal in shapeless form, clad in a man's pilot jacket, and treading in a man's heavy lace boots; with nothing but an old red flannel petticoat, and a broken comb in her frowsy flaxen hair, to tell us that she was a woman—such was the inhuman person who had received us in the darkness, when we first entered the house.

This wonderful valet, collecting her materials for dressing her still more wonderful master's hair, gave him the looking-glass (a hand-mirror), and addressed herself to her work.

She combed, she brushed, she oiled, she perfumed the flowing locks and the long silky beard of Miserrimus Dexter, with the strangest mixture of dulness and dexterity that I ever saw. Done in brute silence, with a lumpish look and a clumsy gait, the work was perfectly

well done, nevertheless. The imp in the chair superintended the whole proceeding critically by means of his hand-mirror. He was too deeply interested in this occupation, to speak, until some of the concluding touches to his beard brought the misnamed Ariel in front of him, and so turned her full face towards the part of the room in which Mrs. Macallan and I were standing. Then he addressed us—taking special care, however, not to turn his head our way while his toilet was still incomplete.

"Mama Macallan," he said, "what is the Christian name of your son's second wife?"

"Why do you want to know?" asked my mother-in-law.

"I want to know, because I can't address her as 'Mrs. Eustace Macallan.'"

"Why not?"

"It recalls the other Mrs. Eustace Macallan. If I am reminded of those horrible days at Gleninch, my fortitude will give way—I shall burst out screaming again."

Hearing this, I hastened to interpose.

"My name is Valeria," I said.

"A Roman name," remarked Miserrimus Dexter. "I like it. My mind is cast in the Roman mould. My bodily build would have been Roman, if I had been born with legs. I shall call you, Mrs. Valeria. Unless you disapprove of it?"

I hastened to say that I was far from disapproving of it.

"Very good," said Miserrimus Dexter. "Mrs. Valeria, do you see the face of this creature in front of me?"

He pointed with the hand-mirror to his cousin as unconcernedly as he might have pointed to a dog. His cousin, on her side, took no more notice than a dog would have taken of the contemptuous phrase by which he had designated her. She went on combing and ciling his beard as composedly as ever.

"It is the face of an idiot, isn't it?" pursued Miserrimus Dexter. "Look at her! She is a mere vegetable. A cabbage in a garden has as much life and expression in it as that girl exhibits at the present moment. Would you believe there was latent intelligence, affection, pride, fidelity, in such a half-developed being as this?"

I was really ashamed to answer him. Quite needless! The impenetrable young woman went on with her master's beard. A machine could not have taken less notice of the life and the talk around it than this incomprehensible creature.

"I have got at that latent affection, pride, fidelity, and the rest of it," resumed Miserrimus Dexter. "I hold the key to that dormant intelligence. Grand thought! Now look at her, when I speak. (I named her, poor wretch, in one of my ironical moments. She has got to like her name, just as a dog gets to like his collar.) Now, Mrs. Valeria, look and listen. Ariel!"

The girl's dull face began to brighten. The girl's mechanically-moving hand stopped, and held the comb in suspense.

"Ariel! you have learnt to dress my hair, and about my beard—haven't you?"

Her face still brightened. "Yes! yes! yes!" she answered eagerly. "And you say I have learnt to do it well—don't you?"

"I say that. Would you let anybody else do it for you?"

Her eyes melted softly into light and life. Her strange unwomanly voice sank to the gentlest tones that I had heard from her yet.

"Nobody else shall do it for me," she said, at once proudly and tenderly. "Nobody, as long as I live, shall touch you but me."

"Not even the lady there?" asked Miserrimus Dexter, pointing backward with his hand-mirror to the place at which I was standing.

Her eyes suddenly flashed, her hand suddenly shook the comb at me, in a burst of jealous rage.

"Let her try!" cried the poor creature, raising her voice again to its harshest notes. "Let her touch you if she dares!"

Dexter laughed at the childish outbreak. "That will do, my delicate Ariel," he said. "I dismiss your intelligence for the present. Relapse into your former self. Finish my beard."

She passively resumed her work. The new light in her eyes, the new expression in her face faded little by little, and died out. In another minute, the face was as vacant and as limpish as before: the hands did their work again with the lifeless dexterity which had so painfully impressed me when she first took up the brush. Miserrimus Dexter appeared to be perfectly satisfied with these results.

"I thought my little experiment might interest you," he said. "You see how it is? The dormant intelligence of my curious cousin is like the dormant sound in a musical instrument. I play upon it—and it answers to my touch." He indulged himself in a last look at the mirror. "Ha!" he said complacently, "now I shall do Vanish, Ariel!"

She tramped out of the room in her heavy boots, with the mute obedience of a trained animal. "I said 'Good night'" as she passed me. She neither returned the salutation nor looked at me; the words simply produced no effects on her dull senses. The one voice that could reach her was silent. She had relapsed once more into the vacant inanimate creature who had opened the gate to us—until it pleased Miserrimus Dexter to speak to her again.

"Valeria!" said my mother-in-law. "Our modest host is waiting to see what you think of him."