

THE LAW AND THE LADY: A NOVEL.

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(From Author's MS. and Advance Sheets)

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Part I.—Paradise Lost

CHAPTER VI.

MY OWN DISCOVERY.

Fortunately for me, the landlord did not open the door when I rang. A stupid maid-of-all-work, who never thought of asking me for my name, let me in. Mrs. Macallan was at home, and had no visitors with her. Giving me this information, the maid led the way upstairs, and showed me into the drawing-room without a word of announcement.

My mother-in-law was sitting alone, near a work-table, knitting. The moment I appeared in the doorway, she laid aside her work; and, rising, signed to me with a commanding gesture of her hand to let her speak first.

"I know what you have come here for," she said. "You have come here to ask questions. Spare yourself, and spare me. I warn you beforehand that I will not answer any questions relating to my son."

It was firmly, but not harshly, said. I spoke firmly in my turn.

"I have not come here, madam, to ask questions about your son," I answered. "I have come—if you will excuse me—to ask you a question about yourself."

She started, and looked at me keenly over her spectacles. I had evidently taken her by surprise.

"What is the question?" she inquired.

"I now know for the first time, madam, that your name is Macallan," I said. "Your son has married me under the name of Woodville. The only honourable explanation of this circumstance, so far as I know, is that my husband is your son by a first marriage. The happiness of my life is at stake. Will you kindly consider my position? Will you let me ask if you have been twice married, and if the name of your first husband was Woodville?"

She considered a little before she replied.

"The question is a perfectly natural one, in your position," she said. "But I think I had better not answer it."

"May I ask why?"

"Certainly. If I answered you, I should only lead to other questions; and I should be obliged to decline replying to them. I am sorry to disappoint you. I repeat what I said on the beach—I have no other feeling than a feeling of sympathy towards you. If you had consulted me before your marriage, I should willingly have admitted you to my fullest confidence. It is now too late. You are married. I recommend you to make the best of your position, and to rest satisfied with things as they are."

"Pardon me, madam," I remonstrated. "As things are, I don't know that I am married. All I know, unless you enlighten me, is that your son has married me under a name that is not his own. How can I be sure whether I am, or am not, his lawful wife?"

"I believe there can be no doubt that you are lawfully my son's wife," Mrs. Macallan answered. "At any rate it is easy to take a legal opinion on the subject. If the opinion is that you are not lawfully married, my son (whatever his faults and failings may be) is a gentleman. He is incapable of wilfully deceiving a woman who loves and trusts him; he will do you justice. On my side, I will do you justice too. If the legal opinion is adverse to your rightful claims, I will promise to answer any questions which you may choose to put to me. As it is, I believe you to be lawfully my son's wife; and I say again, make the best of your position. Be satisfied with your husband's affectionate devotion to you. If you value your peace of mind, and the happiness of your life to come, abstain from attempting to know more than you know now."

She sat down again with the air of a woman who had said her last word.

Further remonstrance would be useless—I could see it in her face; I could hear it in her voice. I turned round to open the drawing-room door.

"You are hard on me, madam," I said at parting. "I am at your mercy, and I must submit."

She suddenly looked up, and answered me with a flush on her kind and handsome old face.

"As God is my witness, child, I pity you from the bottom of my heart!"

After that extraordinary outburst of feeling, she took up her work with one hand, and signed to me with the other to leave her.

I bowed to her in silence, and went out.

I had entered the house, far from feeling sure of the course I ought to take in the future. I left the house, positively resolved, come what might of it, to discover the secret which the mother and son were hiding from me. As to the question of the name, I saw it now in the light in which I ought to have seen it from the first. If Mrs. Macallan had been twice married (as I had rashly chosen to suppose) she would certainly have shown some signs of recognition, when she heard me addressed by her first husband's name. Where all else was mystery, there was no mystery here. Whatever his reasons might be, Eustace had assuredly married me under an assumed name.



She was a middle-aged woman, with a large experience of the world and its wickedness written legibly on her manner and on her face. My hair, however, stood in need of some skilled attention. The chambermaid rearranged it, with a ready hand which showed that she was no beginner in the art of dressing hair.—(See page 318, col. 2.)

Approaching the door of our lodgings, I saw my husband walking backwards and forwards before it, evidently waiting for my return. If he asked me the question, I decided to tell him frankly where I had been, and what had passed between his mother and myself.

He hurried to meet me with signs of disturbance in his face and manner.

"I have a favour to ask of you, Valeria," he said. "Do you mind returning with me to London by the next train?"

I looked at him. In the popular phrase, I could hardly believe my own ears.

"It's a matter of business," he went on, "of no interest to any one but myself; and it requires my presence in London. You don't wish to sail just yet, as I understand? I can't leave you here by yourself. Have you any objections to going to London for a day or two?"

I made no objection. I too was eager to go back.

In London, I could obtain the legal opinion which would tell me whether I was lawfully married to Eustace or not. In London, I should be within reach of the help and advice of my father's faithful old clerk. I could confide in Benjamin as I could confide in no one else. Nearly as I loved my uncle Starkweather, I

shrank from communicating with him in my present need. His wife had told me that I had made a bad beginning when I signed the wrong name in the marriage register. Shall I own it? My pride shrank from acknowledging, before the honeymoon was over, that his wife was right.

In two hours more we were on the railway again. Ah, what a contrast that second journey presented to the first! On our way to Ramsgate, everybody could see that we were a newly married couple. On our way to London, nobody noticed us; nobody would have doubted that we had been married for years.

We went to a private hotel in the neighbourhood of Portland Place.

After breakfast, the next morning, Eustace announced that he must leave me to attend to his business. I had previously mentioned to him that I had some purchases to make in London. He was quite willing to let me go out alone—on the condition that I should take a carriage provided by the hotel.

My heart was heavy that morning; I felt the unacknowledged estrangement that had grown up between us very keenly. My husband opened the door to go out—and came back to kiss me before he left me by myself. That little after-

thought of tenderness touched me. Acting on the impulse of the moment, I put my arm round his neck and pressed him to me gently.

"My darling," I said, "give me all your confidence. I know that you love me. Show that you can trust me too."

He sighed bitterly, and drew back from me—in sorrow, not in anger.

"I thought we had agreed, Valeria, not to return to that subject again," he said. "You only distress yourself and distress me."

He left the room abruptly, as if he dare not trust himself to say more. It is better not to dwell on what I felt after this last repulse. I ordered the carriage at once. I was eager to find a refuge from my own thoughts in movement and change.

I drove to the shops first, and made the purchases which I had mentioned to Eustace by way of giving a reason for going out. Then I devoted myself to the object which I really had at heart. I went to old Benjamin's little villa, in the byways of St. John's Wood.

As soon as he had got over the first surprise of seeing me, he noticed that I looked pale and careworn. I confessed at once that I was in trouble. We sat down together by the bright fireside in his little library (Benjamin, as far as