

THE LAW AND THE LADY: A NOVEL.

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PART II.—PARADISE REGAINED.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE INDICTMENT OF MRS. BEAULY.

"I am equally good at the autobiographical style," he said. "Shall we try that next, by way of variety?"

"Anything you like," I cried, losing all patience with him, "if you will only go on!"

"Part Two; Autobiographical Style," he announced with a wave of his hand. "I hopped along the Guest's Corridor, and turned into the South Corridor. I stopped at the little study. Door open; nobody there. I crossed the study to the second door, communicating with Mrs. Macallan's bedchamber. Locked! I looked through the keyhole. Was there something hanging over it, on the other side? I can't say, I only know there was nothing to be seen but black darkness. I listened. Nothing to be heard. Same blank darkness, same absolute silence, inside the locked second door of Mrs. Eustace's room, opening on the corridor. I went on to her husband's bedchamber. I had the worst possible opinion of Mrs. Beaully—I should not have been in the least surprised if I had caught her in Eustace's room. I looked through the keyhole. In this case, the key was out of it—or was turned the right way for me—I don't know which. Eustace's bed was opposite the door. No discovery. I could see him, all by himself, innocently asleep. I reflected a little. The back staircase was at the end of the corridor, beyond me. I slid down the stairs, and looked about me on the lower floor, by the light of the night-lamp. Doors all fast locked, and keys outside, so that I could try them myself. House door barred and bolted. Door leading into the servants' offices barred and bolted. I got back to my own room, and thought it out quietly. Where could she be? Certainly in the house, somewhere. Where? I had made sure of the other rooms; the field of search was exhausted. She could only be in Mrs. Macallan's room—the one room which had baffled my investigations; the only room which had not lent itself to examination. Add to this, that the key of the door in the study, communicating with Mrs. Macallan's room, was stated in the nurse's evidence to be missing; and don't forget that the dearest object of Mrs. Beaully's life (on the showing of her own letter, read at the Trial) was to be Eustace Macallan's happy wife. Put these things together in your own mind, and you will know what my thoughts were, as I sat waiting for events in my chair, without my telling you. Towards four o'clock, strong as I am, fatigue got the better of me. I fell asleep. Not for long. I woke with a start and looked at my watch. Twenty-five minutes past four. Had she got back to her room while I was asleep? I hopped to her door and listened. Not a sound. I softly opened the door. The room was empty. I went back again to my own room to wait and watch. It was hard work to keep my eyes open. I drew up the window to let the cool air refresh me; I fought hard with exhausted nature; and exhausted nature won. I fell asleep again. This time it was eight in the morning when I woke. I have goodish ears, as you may have noticed. I heard women's voices talking under my open window. I peeped out. Mrs. Beaully and her maid, in close confabulation! Mrs. Beaully and her maid, looking guiltily about them to make sure that they were neither seen nor heard! "Take care, ma'am," I heard the maid say; "that horrid deformed monster is as sly as a fox. Mind he doesn't discover you." Mrs. Beaully answered, "You go first, and look out in front; I will follow you; and make sure there is nobody behind us." With that, they disappeared round the corner of the house. In five minutes more I heard the door of Mrs. Beaully's room softly opened and closed again. Three hours later, the nurse met her in the corridor, innocently on her way to make inquiries at Mrs. Eustace Macallan's door. What do you think of these circumstances? What do you think of Mrs. Beaully and her maid having something to say to each other which they didn't dare say in the house—for fear of my being behind some door listening to them? What do you think of these discoveries of mine being made on the very morning when Mrs. Eustace was taken ill—on the very day when she died by a poisoner's hand? Do you see your way to the guilty person? And has mad Miserrimus Dexter been of some assistance to you, so far?"

I was too violently excited to answer him. The way to the vindication of my husband's innocence was opened to me at last!

"Where is she?" I cried. "And where is that servant who is in her confidence?"

"I can't tell you," he said. "I don't know."

"Where can I inquire? Can you tell me that?"

He considered a little. "There is one man who must know where she is—or who could find it out for you," he said.

"Who is he? What is his name?"

"He is a friend of Eustace's. Major Fitz-David."

"I know him! I am going to dine with him next week. He has asked you to dine too."

Miserrimus Dexter laughed contemptuously.

"Major Fitz-David may do very well for the ladies," he said. "The ladies can treat him as a species of elderly human lap-dog. I don't dine with lap-dogs; I have said No. You go. He, or some of his ladies, may be of use to you. Who are the guests? Did he tell you?"

"There was a French lady whose name I forget," I said, "and Lady Clarinda."

"That will do! She is a friend of Mrs. Beaully's. She is sure to know where Mrs. Beaully is. Come to me the moment you have got your information. Find out if the maid is with her; she is the easiest to deal with of the two. Only make the maid open her lips, and we have got Mrs. Beaully. We crush her," he cried, bringing his hand down like lightning on the last languid fly of the season, crawling over the arm of his chair, "we crush her as I crush this fly. Stop! A question; a most important question in dealing with the maid. Have you got any money?"

"Plenty of money."

He snapped his fingers joyously.

"The maid is ours!" he cried. "It's a matter of pounds, shillings, and pence with the maid. Wait! Another question. About your name? If you approach Mrs. Beaully in your own character as Eustace's wife, you approach her as the woman who has taken her place—you make a mortal enemy of her at starting. Beware of that!"

My jealousy of Mrs. Beaully, smouldering in me all through the interview, burst into flame at those words. I could resist it no longer—I was obliged to ask him if my husband had ever loved her.

"Tell me the truth," I said. "Did Eustace really—?"

He burst out laughing maliciously, he penetrated my jealousy, and guessed my question almost before it had passed my lips.

"Yes," he said, "Eustace did really love her, and no mistake about it. She had every reason to believe (before the Trial) that the wife's death would put her in the wife's place. But the Trial made another man of Eustace. Mrs. Beaully had been a witness of the public degradation of him. That was enough to prevent his marrying Mrs. Beaully. He broke off with her at once and for ever—for the same reason precisely which has led him to separate himself from you. Existence with a woman who knew that he had been tried for his life as a murderer, was an existence that he was not hero enough to face. You wanted the truth. There it is! You have need to be cautious of Mrs. Beaully—you have no need to be jealous of her. Take the safe course. Arrange with the Major, when you meet Lady Clarinda at his dinner, that you meet her under an assumed name."

"I can go to the dinner," I said, "under the name in which Eustace married me. I can go as 'Mrs. Woodville.'"

"The very thing!" he exclaimed. "What would I not give to be present when Lady Clarinda introduces you to Mrs. Beaully! Think of the situation. A woman with a hideous secret, hidden in her inmost soul; and another woman who knows of it—another woman who is bent, by fair means or foul, on dragging that secret into the light of day. What a struggle! What a plot for a novel! I am in a fever when I think of it. I am beside myself when I look into the future, and see Mrs. Borgia-Beaully brought to her knees at last. Don't be alarmed!" he cried, with the wild light flashing once more in his eyes. "My brains are beginning to boil again in my head. I must take refuge in physical exercise. I must blow off the steam, or I shall explode in my pink jacket on the spot!"

The old madness seized on him again. I made for the door, to secure my retreat in case of necessity—and then ventured to look round at him.

He was off on his furious wheels—half man, half chair—flying like a whirlwind to the other end of the room. Even this exercise was not violent enough for him, in his present mood. In an instant he was down on the floor, poised on his hands, and looking in the distance like a monstrous frog. Hopping down the room, he overthrew, one after another, all the smaller and lighter chairs as he passed them. Arrived at the end, he turned, surveyed the prostrate chairs, encouraged himself with a scream of triumph, and leapt rapidly over chair after chair, on his hands—his limbless body, now thrown back from the shoulders, and now thrown forward to keep the balance, in a manner at once wonderful and horrible to behold. "Dexter's Leapfrog!" he cried cheerfully, perching himself with his birdlike lightness on the last of the prostrate chairs, when he had reached the farther end of the room. "I'm pretty active, Mrs. Valeria, considering I'm a cripple. Let us drink to the hanging of Mrs. Beaully in another bottle of Burgundy."

I seized desperately on the first excuse that occurred to me for getting away from him.

"You forget," I said—"I must go at once to the Major. If I don't warn him in time, he may speak of me to Lady Clarinda by the wrong name."

Ideas of hurry and movement were just the ideas to take his fancy, in his present state. He blew furiously on the whistle that summoned Ariel from the kitchen regions, and danced up and down on his hands in the full frenzy of his delight.

"Ariel shall get you a cab!" he cried. "Drive at a gallop to the Major's. Set the trap for her without losing a moment. Oh, what a

day of days this has been! Oh, what a relief to get rid of my dreadful secret, and share it with you! I am suffocating with happiness—I am like the Spirit of the Earth in Shelley's poem. He broke out with the magnificent lines in "Prometheus Unbound," in which the Earth feels the Spirit of Love, and bursts into speech. 'The joy, the triumph, the delight, the madness! The boundless, overflowing, bursting, gladness. The vaporous exultation not to be confined! Ha! ha! the animation of delight, which wraps me like an atmosphere of light, and bears me as a cloud is borne by its own wind.' That's how I feel, Valeria! that's how I feel!"

I crossed the threshold while he was still speaking. The last I saw of him, he was pouring out that glorious flood of words—his deformed body, poised on the overthrown chair, his face lifted in rapture in some fantastic Heaven of his own making. I slipped out softly into the antechamber. Even as I crossed the room, he changed once more! I heard his ringing cry; I heard the soft thump-thump of his hands on the floor. He was going down the room again, in "Dexter's Leap-Frog," flying over the prostrate chairs!

In the hall, Ariel was on the watch for me. As I approached her, I happened to be putting on my gloves. She stopped me; and taking my right arm, lifted my hand towards her face. Was she going to kiss it? or to bite it? Neither. She smelt it like a dog—and dropped it again with a hoarse chuckling laugh.

"You don't smell of his perfumes," she said. "You haven't touched his beard. Now I believe you. Want a cab?"

"Thank you. I'll walk till I meet a cab." She was bent on being polite to me—now I had not touched his beard.

"I say!" she burst out, in her deepest notes. "Yes?"

"I am glad I didn't upset you in the canal. There now!"

She gave me a friendly smack on the shoulder which nearly knocked me down—reaped, the instant after, into her leaden stolidity of look and manner—and led the way out by the front door. I heard her hoarse chuckling laugh as she locked the gate behind me. My star was at last in the ascendant! In one and the same day I had found my way into the confidence of Ariel and Ariel's Master!

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE DEFENCE OF MRS. BEAULY.

The days that elapsed before Major Fitz-David's dinner-party were precious days to me. My long interview with Miserrimus Dexter had disturbed me far more seriously than I suspected at the time. It was not until some hours after I had left him, that I really began to feel how my nerves had been tried by all that I had seen and heard, during my visit at his house. I started at the slightest noises; I dreamed of dreadful things; I was ready to cry without reason, at one moment, and to fly into a passion without reason, at another. Absolute rest was what I wanted, and (thanks to my good Benjamin) was what I got. The dear old man controlled his anxieties on my account, and spared me the questions which his fatherly interest in my welfare made him eager to ask. It was tacitly understood between us that all conversation on the subject of my visit to Miserrimus Dexter (of which, it is needless to say he strongly disapproved), should be deferred until repose had restored my energies of the body and mind. I saw no visitors. Mrs. Macallan came to the cottage, and Major Fitz-David came to the cottage—one of them to hear what had passed between Miserrimus Dexter and myself; the other to amuse me with the latest gossip about the guests at the forthcoming dinner. Benjamin took it on himself to make my apologies, and to spare me the exertion of receiving my visitors. We hired a little open carriage, and took long drives in the pretty country lanes, still left flourishing within a few miles of the northern suburb of London. At home, we sat and talked quietly of old times, or played at back-gammon and dominoes—and so, for a few happy days, led the peaceful unadventurous life which was good for me. When the day of the dinner arrived, I felt restored to my customary health. I was ready again, and eager again, for the introduction to Lady Clarinda, and the discovery of Mrs. Beaully.

Benjamin looked a little sadly at my flushed face, as we drove to Major Fitz-David's house.

"Ah, my dear," he said, in his simple way, "I see you are well again! You have had enough of our quiet life, already."

My recollection of events and persons, in general, at the dinner-party, is singularly indistinct. I remember that we were very merry, and as easy and familiar with one another as if we had been old friends. I remember that Madame Mirrillmore was unapproachably superior to the other women present, in the perfect beauty of her dress, and in the ample justice which she did to the luxurious dinner set before us. I remember the Major's young prima-donna, more round-eyed, more over-dressed, more shrill and strident as the coming "Queen of Song," than ever. I remember the Major himself, always kissing our hands, always luring us to indulge in dainty dishes and drinks, always making love, always detecting resemblances between us, always "under the charm," and never once out of his character as elderly Don Juan, from the beginning of the evening to the end. I remain-

ber dear old Benjamin completely bewildered, shrinking into corners, blushing when he was personally drawn into the conversation, frightened at Madame Mirrillmore, bashful with Lady Clarinda, submissive to the Major, suffering under the music, and, from the bottom of his honest old heart, wishing himself home again. And there, as to the members of that cheerful little gathering, my memory finds its limits—with one exception. The appearance of Lady Clarinda is as present to me as if I had met her yesterday; and of the memorable conversation which we two held together privately, towards the close of the evening, it is no exaggeration to say that I can still call to mind almost every word.

I see her dress, I hear her voice again, while I write.

She was attired, I remember, with that extreme assumption of simplicity which always defeats its own end, by irresistibly suggesting art. She wore plain white muslin, over white silk, without trimming or ornament of any kind. Her rich brown hair, dressed in defiance of the prevailing fashion, was thrown back from her forehead, and gathered into a simple knot behind—without adornment of any sort. A little white ribbon encircled her neck, fastened by the only article of jewellery that she wore—a tiny diamond brooch. She was unquestionably handsome; but her beauty was of the somewhat hard and angular type which is so often seen in English women of her race: the nose and chin too prominent and too firmly shaped; the well-opened grey eyes full of spirit and dignity, but wanting in tenderness and mobility of expression. Her manner had all the charm which fine breeding can confer—exquisitely polite, easily cordial; showing that perfect yet unobtrusive confidence in herself, which (in England) seems to be the natural outgrowth of pre-eminent social rank. If you had accepted her for what she was, on the surface, you would have said, Here is the model of a noble woman who is perfectly free from pride. And if you had taken a liberty with her, on the strength of that conviction, she would have made you remember it to the end of your life.

We got on together admirably. I was introduced as "Mrs. Woodville," by previous arrangement with the Major—effected through Benjamin. Before the dinner was over, we had promised to exchange visits. Nothing but the opportunity was wanting to lead Lady Clarinda into talking, as I wanted her to talk, of Mrs. Beaully.

Late in the evening, the opportunity came.

I had taken refuge from the terrible bravura singing of the Major's strident prima-donna, in the back drawing-room. As I had hoped and anticipated, after a while, Lady Clarinda (missing me from the group round the piano) came in search of me. She seated herself by my side out of sight and out of hearing of our friends in the front room; and, to my infinite relief and delight, touched on the subject of Miserrimus Dexter, of her own accord. Something I had said of him, when his name had been accidentally mentioned at dinner, remained in her memory and led us, by perfectly natural gradations, into speaking of Mrs. Beaully. "At last," I thought to myself, "the Major's little dinner will bring me my reward!"

And what a reward it was, when it came! My heart sinks in me again—as it sank on that never-to-be-forgotten evening—while I sit at my desk, thinking of it.

"So Dexter really spoke to you of Mrs. Beaully!" exclaimed Lady Clarinda. "You have no idea how you surprise me,"

"May I ask why?"

"He hates her. The last time I saw him he wouldn't allow me to mention her name. It is one of his innumerable oddities. If any such feeling as sympathy is a possible feeling in such a nature as his, he ought to like Helen Beaully. She is the most completely unconventional person I know. When she does break out, poor dear, she says things and does things which are almost reckless enough to be worthy of Dexter himself. I wonder whether you would like her?"

"You have kindly asked me to visit you, Lady Clarinda. Perhaps I may meet her at your house?"

Lady Clarinda laughed as if the idea amused her.

"I hope you will not wait until that is likely to happen," she said. "Helena's last whim is to fancy that she has got—the gout, of all maladies in the world! She is away at some wonderful baths in Hungary or Bohemia—I don't remember which—and where she will go, or what she will do next it is perfectly impossible to say. Dear Mrs. Woodville, is the heat of the fire too much for you? You are looking quite pale."

I felt I was looking pale. The discovery of Mrs. Beaully's absence from England was a shock for which I was quite unprepared. For the moment it unnerved me.

"Shall we go into the other room?" asked Lady Clarinda.

To go into the other room would be to drop the conversation. I was determined not to let that catastrophe happen. It was just possible that Mrs. Beaully's maid might have quitted her service, or might have been left behind in England. My information would not be complete until I knew what had become of the maid. I pushed my chair back a little from the fireplace, and took a hand-screen from a table near me. It might be made useful in hiding my