

THE LAW AND THE LADY: A NOVEL.

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(From Author's MS. and Advance Sheets)

[ENTRÉD 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 XL. (continued).

NEMESIS AT LAST!

You look at them earnest creature that crawls—look at Me. Let me find my inspiration in your eyes. Let me feed my hungry admiration on your form. Come! have one little pitying smile left for the man whose happiness you have wrecked. Thank you. Light of my life, thank you!" He kissed his hand to me, and threw himself back luxuriously in his chair. "The story," he resumed. "The story at last! In what form shall I cast it? In the dramatic form—the oldest way, the truest way, the shortest way of telling a story! Title, first. A short title, a taking title: Mistress and Maid. Scene, the land of romance—Italy. Time, the age of romance—the fifteenth century. Ha! look at Ariel. She knows no more about the fifteenth century than the cat in the kitchen, and yet she is interested already. 'Happy Ariel!'"

Ariel looked at me again, in the double intoxication of the wine and the triumph. "I know no more than the cat in the kitchen," she repeated, with a broad grin of gratified vanity. "I am 'happy Ariel!' What are you?"

Miserrimus Dexter laughed uproariously. "Didn't I tell you?" he said. "Isn't she fun? Persons of the Drama," he resumed:—"Three in number. Women only. Angelica, a noble lady; noble alike in spirit and in birth. Cunegonda, a beautiful devil, in woman's form. Damoride, her unfortunate maid. First scene. A dark vaulted chamber in a castle. Time, evening. The owls are hooting in the wood; the frogs are croaking in the marsh. Look at Ariel! Her flesh creeps; she shudders audibly. Admirable Ariel!"

My rival in the Master's favour eyed me defiantly. "Admirable Ariel!" she repeated, in drowsy accents. Miserrimus Dexter paused to take up his goblet of Burgundy—placed close at hand on a little sliding table attached to his chair. I watched him narrowly, as he sipped the wine. The flush was still mounting in his face; the light was still brightening in his eyes. He set down his glass again, with a jovial smack of his lips—and went on.

"Persons present in the vaulted chamber:—Cunegonda and Damoride. 'Cunegonda speaks, 'Damoride!' 'Madam?' 'Who lies ill in the chamber above us?' 'Madam, the noble lady, Angelica.' (A pause. Cunegonda speaks again.) 'Damoride!' 'Madam?' 'How does Angelica like you?' 'Madam, the noble lady, sweet and good to all who approach her, is sweet and good to me.' 'Have you attended on her, Damoride?' 'Sometimes, madam, when the nurse was weary.' 'Has she taken her healing medicine from your hand?' 'Once or twice, madam, when I happened to be by.' 'Damoride, take this key, and open the casket on the table there.' (Damoride obeys.) 'Do you see a green vial in the casket?' 'I see it, madam.' 'Take it out.' (Damoride obeys.) 'Do you see a liquid in the green vial? can you guess what it is?' 'No, madam.' 'Shall I tell you?' (Damoride bows respectfully.) 'Poison is in the vial.' (Damoride starts; she shrinks from the poison; she would fain put it aside. Her mistress signs to her to keep it in her hand; her mistress speaks.) 'Damoride, I have told you one of my secrets; shall I tell you another?' (Damoride waits, fearing what is to come. Her mistress speaks.) 'I hate the Lady Angelica. Her life stands between me and the joy of my heart. You hold her life in your hand.' (Damoride drops on her knees; she is a devout person; she crosses herself, and then she speaks.) 'Mistress, you terrify me. Mistress, what do I hear?' (Cunegonda advances, stands over her, looks down on her with terrible eyes, whispers the next words.) 'Damoride! The Lady Angelica must die—and I must not be suspected. The Lady Angelica must die—and by your hand.'

He paused again. To sip the wine once more? No; to drink a deep draught of it, this time.

Was the stimulant beginning to fail him already?

I looked at him attentively, as he laid himself back again in his chair, to consider for a moment before he went on.

The flush on his face was as deep as ever; but the brightness in his eyes was beginning to fade already. I had noticed that he spoke more and more slowly as he advanced to the later dialogue of the scene. Was he feeling the effort of invention already? Had the time come when the wine had done all that the wine could do for him?

We waited. Ariel sat watching him, with vacantly-staring eyes and vacantly-open mouth. Benjamin, impenetrably expecting the signal, kept his open note-book on his knee, covered by his hand.

Miserrimus Dexter went on.

"Damoride hears those terrible words; Damoride clasps her hands in entreaty. 'Oh, madam! madam! how can I kill the dear and noble lady? What motive have I for harming her?' Cunegonda answers, 'You have the motive of obeying Me.' Damoride falls with her face on the floor, at her mistress's feet. 'Madam, I cannot do it! Madam, I dare not do it!' Cunegonda answers, 'You run no risk; I have my plan for diverting discovery from myself, and my plan for diverting discovery from you.' Damoride repeats, 'I cannot do it! I dare not do it!' Cunegonda's eyes flash lightnings of rage. She takes from its place of concealment in her bosom—"

He stopped in the middle of the sentence, and put his hand to his head. Not like a man in pain, but like a man who had lost his idea.

Would it be well if I tried to help him to recover his idea? or would it be wiser (if I could only do it) to keep silence?

I could see the drift of his story plainly enough. His object, under the thin disguise of the Italian romance, was to meet my unanswerable objection to suspecting Mrs. Beauty's maid—the objection that the woman had no motive for committing herself to an act of murder. If he could practically contradict this, by discovering a motive which I should be obliged to admit, his end would be gained. Those inquiries which I had pledged myself to pursue—those inquiries which might, at any moment, take a turn that directly concerned him—would, in that case, be successfully diverted from the right to the wrong person. The innocent maid would set my strictest scrutiny at defiance; and Dexter would be safely shielded behind her.

I determined to give him time. Not a word passed my lip.

The minutes followed each other. I waited in the deepest anxiety. It was a trying and a critical moment. If he succeeded in inventing a probable motive, and in shaping it neatly to suit the purpose of his story, he would prove, by that act alone, that there were reserves of mental power still left in him, which the practised eye of the Scotch doctor had failed to see. But the question was—would he do it?

He did it! Not in a new way; not in a convincing way; not without a painfully-evident effort. Still, well done, or ill none, he found a motive for the maid.

"Cunegonda," he resumed, "takes from its place of concealment in her bosom a written paper, and unfolds it. 'Look at this,' she says. Damoride looks at the paper, and sinks again at her mistress's feet in a paroxysm of horror and despair. Cunegonda is in possession of a shameful secret in the maid's past life. Cunegonda can say to her, 'Choose your alternative. Either submit to an exposure which disgraces you, and disgraces your parents, for ever—or make up your mind to obey Me.' Damoride might submit to the disgrace if it only affected herself. But her parents are honest people; she cannot disgrace her parents. She is driven to her last refuge—there is no hope of melting the hard heart of Cunegonda. Her only resource is to raise difficulties; she tries to show that there are obstacles between her and the crime. 'Madam! Madam!' she cries, 'when the nurse is there to see me?' Cunegonda answers, 'Sometimes the nurse sleeps; sometimes the nurse is away.' Damoride still persists. 'Madam! madam! the door is kept locked, and the nurse has got the key.'

The key! I instantly thought of the missing key at Gleninch. Had he thought of it too? He certainly checked himself as the word escaped him. I resolved to make the signal. I rested my elbow on the arm of my chair, and played with my earring. Benjamin took out his pencil, and arranged his note-book, so that Ariel could not see what he was about, if she happened to look his way.

We waited, until it pleased Miserrimus Dexter to proceed. The interval was a long one. His hand went up again to his forehead. A duller and duller look was palpably stealing over his eyes. When he did speak, it was not to go on with the narrative but to put a question.

"Where did I leave off?" he asked.

My hopes sank again as rapidly as they had risen. I managed to answer him, however, without showing any change in my manner.

"You left off," I said, "where Damoride was speaking to Cunegonda—"

"Yes! yes!" he interposed. "And what did she say?"

"She said, 'The door is kept locked, and the nurse has got the key.'"

He instantly leaned forward in his chair.

"No!" he answered vehemently. "You're wrong. 'Key?' Nonsense! I never said, 'Key.'"

"I thought you did, Mr. Dexter."

"I never did! I said something else; and you have forgotten it."

I refrained from disputing with him, in fear of what might follow. We waited again. Benjamin, sullenly submitting to my caprices, had taken down the questions and answers that had passed between Dexter and myself. He still mechanically kept his page open, and still held his pencil in readiness to go on. Ariel, quietly submitting to the drowsy influence of the wine while Dexter's voice was in her ears, felt uneasily the change to silence. She glanced round her restlessly; she lifted her eyes to "the Master."

There he sat, silent, with his hand to his head still struggling to marshal his wandering thoughts; still trying to see light through the darkness that was closing round him.

"Master!" cried Ariel piteously. "What's become of the story?"

He started as if she had awakened him out of a sleep; he shook his head impatiently, as though he wanted to throw off some oppression that weighed upon it.

"Patience! patience!" he said. "The story is going on again."

"He dashed at it desperately; he picked up the first lost thread that fell in his way, reckless whether it was the right thread or the wrong one."

"Damoride fell on her knees. She burst into tears. She said—"

He stopped, and looked about him with vacant eyes.

"What name did I give the other woman?" he asked; not putting the question to me, or to either of my companions; asking it of himself, or asking it of the empty air.

"You called the other woman, Cunegonda," I said.

At the sound of my voice, his eyes turned slowly—turned on me, and yet failed to look at me. Dull and absent, still and changeless, they were eyes that seemed to be fixed on something far away. Even his voice was altered when he spoke next. It had dropped to a quiet, vacant, monotonous tone. I had heard something like it while I was watching by my husband's bedside, at the time of his delirium—when Eustace's mind appeared to be too weary to follow his speech. Was the end so near as this?

"I called her Cunegonda," he repeated. "And I called the other—"

He stopped once more.

"And you called the other Damoride," I said. Ariel looked up at him with a broad stare of bewilderment. She pulled impatiently at the sleeve of his jacket, to attract his notice.

"Is this the story, Master?" she asked.

He answered without looking at her; his changeless eyes still fixed, as it seemed on something far away.

"This is the story," he said absently. "But why Cunegonda? why Damoride? Why not Mistress and Maid? It's easier to remember Mistress and Maid—"

He hesitated; he shivered as he tried to raise himself in his chair. Then he seemed to rally. "What did the Maid say to the Mistress?" he muttered. "What? what? what?" He hesitated again. Then something seemed to dawn upon him, unexpectedly. Was it some new thought that had struck him? Or some lost thought that he had recovered? Impossible to say! He went on, suddenly and rapidly went on, in three strange words.

"The letter," the Maid said. "The letter. Oh, my heart. Every word a dagger. A dagger in my heart. Oh, you letter. Horrible, horrible, horrible letter."

What, in God's name, was he talking about? What did those words mean?

Was he unconsciously pursuing his faint and fragmentary recollections of a past time at Gleninch, under the delusion that he was going on with the story? In the wreck of the other faculties, was memory the last to sink? Was the truth, the dreadful truth, glimmering on me dimly, through the awful shadow cast before it by the advancing eclipse of the brain? My breath failed me; a nameless horror crept through my whole being.

Benjamin, with his pencil in his hand, cast one warning look at me. Ariel was quiet and satisfied. "Go on, Master," was all she said, "I like it! I like it! Go on with the story."

He went on—like a man sleeping with his eyes open, and talking in his sleep.

"The maid said to the Mistress. No; the Mistress said to the Maid. The Mistress said, 'Show him the letter. Must, must, must do it.' The Maid said, 'No. Mustn't do it. Shan't show it. Stuff. Nonsense. Let him suffer. We can get him off. Show it. No. Let the worst come to the worst. Show it then.' The Mistress said—"

He paused, and waved his hand rapidly to and fro before his eyes, as if he was brushing away some visionary confusion or entanglement. "Which was it last?" he said, "Mistress or Maid? Mistress? No. Maid speaks, of course. Loud. Positive. 'You scoundrels. Keep away from that table. The Diary's there. Number-Nine, Caldershaws. Ask for Dandle. You shan't have the Diary. A secret in your ear. The Diary will hang him, I won't have him hanged. How dare you touch my chair. My chair is Me? How dare you touch me?'"

The last words burst on me like a gleam of light! I had read them in the Report of the Trial—in the evidence of the sheriff's officer. Miserrimus Dexter had spoken in those very terms, when he had tried vainly to prevent the men from seizing my husband's papers, and when the men had pushed his chair out of the room. There was no doubt now of what his memory was busy with. The mystery at Gleninch! His last backward flight of thought circled feebly and more feebly nearer and nearer to the mystery at Gleninch!

Ariel roused him again. She had no mercy on him; she insisted on hearing the whole story.

"Why do you stop, Master? Get along with it! get along with it! Tell us quick—what did the Missus say to the Maid?"

He laughed feebly, and tried to imitate her. "What did the Missus say to the Maid?" he repeated. His laugh died away. He went on speaking more and more vacantly, more and more rapidly. "The Mistress said to the Maid, 'We've got him off. What about the letter? Burn it now. No fire in the grate. No matches in the box. House topsy-turvy. Servants all gone. Tear it up. Shake it up in the basket. Along with the rest. Shake it up. Waste paper. Throw it away. Gone for ever. Oh, Sara, Sara, Sara. Gone for ever.'"

Ariel clapped her hands, and mimicked him, in her turn.

"Oh, Sara, Sara, Sara," she repeated. "Gone for ever. That's prime, Master! Tell us—who was Sara?"

His lips moved. But his voice sank so low that I could barely hear it. He began again, with the old melancholy refrain.

"The Maid said to the Mistress. No. The Mistress said to the Maid—"

He fell back in the chair. The shrill and dreadful laugh died away into a low sob. Then there was one long deep wearily-drawn breath. Then, nothing but a mute vacant face turned up to the ceiling, white eyes that looked blindly, with lips parted in a senseless changeless grin. Nemesis at last! The foretold doom had fallen on him. The night had come.

But one feeling animated me, when the first shock was over. Even the horror of that fearful sight seemed only to increase the pity that I felt for the stricken wretch. I started impulsively to my feet. Seeing nothing, thinking of nothing, but the helpless figure in the chair, I sprang forward to raise him; to revive him; to recall him (if such a thing might be possible) to himself. At the first step that I took, I felt hands on me—I was violently drawn back. "Are you blind?" cried Benjamin, dragging me nearer and nearer to the door. "Look there!"

He pointed; and I looked.

Ariel had been beforehand with me. She had raised her master in the chair; she had got one arm round him. In her free hand she brandished an Indian club, torn from a "trophy" of Oriental weapons that ornamented the wall over the fire place. The creature was transfixed! Her dull eyes glared like the eyes of a wild animal. She gnashed her teeth in the frenzy that possessed her. "You have done this!" she shouted to me, waving the club furiously round and round over her head. "Come near him; and I'll dash your brains out! I'll mash you till there's not a whole bone left in your skin!" Benjamin, still holding me with one hand, opened the door with the other. I let him do with me as he would; Ariel fascinated me; I could look at nothing but Ariel. Her frenzy vanished as she saw us retreating. She dropped the club; she threw both arms round him, and nestled her head on his bosom, and sobbed and wept over him. "Master! Master! They shan't vex you any more. Look up again. Laugh at me as you used to do. Say 'Ariel; you are a fool.' Be like yourself again?" I was forced into the next room. I heard a long low wailing cry of misery from the poor creature who loved him with a dog's fidelity and a woman's devotion. The heavy door was closed between us. I was in the quiet antechamber; crying over that piteous sight; clinging to my kind old friend, as helpless and as useless as a child.

Benjamin turned the key in the lock. "There's no use in crying about it," he said quietly. "It would be more to the purpose, Valeria, if you thanked God that you have got out of the room, safe and sound. Come with me."

He took the key out of the lock, and led me downstairs into the hall. After a little consideration, he opened the front door of the house. The gardener was still quietly at work in the grounds.

"Your master is taken ill," Benjamin said; "and the woman who attends upon him has lost her head—if she ever had a head to lose. Where does the nearest doctor live?"

The man's devotion to Dexter, showed itself as the woman's devotion had shown itself—in the man's rough way. He threw down his spade, with an oath.

"The Master taken bad?" he said. "I'll fetch the doctor. I shall find him sooner than you will."

"Tell the doctor to bring a man with him," Benjamin added. "He may want help."

The gardener turned around sternly.

"I'm the man," he said. "Nobody shall help but me."

He left us. I sat down on one of the chairs in the hall, and did my best to compose myself. Benjamin walked to and fro, deep in thought. "Both of them fond of him," I heard my old friend say to himself. "Half monkey, half man—and both of them fond of him. That beats me."

The gardener returned with the doctor—a quiet, dark, resolute man. Benjamin advanced to meet them. "I have got the key," he said. "Shall I go upstairs with you?"

Without answering, the doctor drew Benjamin aside into a corner of the hall. The two talked together in low voices. At the end of it, the doctor said, "Give me the key. You can be of no use; you will only irritate her."

With those words, he beckoned to the gardener. He was about to lead the way up the stairs, when I ventured to stop him.

"May I stay in the hall, sir?" I said. "I am very anxious to hear how it ends."

He looked at me for a moment, before he replied.

"You had better go home, madam," he said. "Is the gardener acquainted with your address?" "Yes, sir."