

THE LAW AND THE LADY: A NOVEL.

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(From Author's MS. and Advance Sheets)

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PART II.—PARADISE REGAINED.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE WIFE'S CONFESSION.

You will find it gone. Post yourself quietly in the little study; and you will discover the Diary, when Miserrimus Dexter leaves me, in the hands of your friend."

October 20.

"I have read your Diary.

"At last I know what you really think of me. I have read what Miserrimus Dexter promised I should read—the confession of your loathing for me, in your own handwriting.

"You will not receive what I wrote to you yesterday, at the time, or in the manner, which I had proposed. Long as my letter is, I have still, after reading your Diary, some more words to add. After I have closed and sealed the envelope, and addressed it to you, I shall put it under my pillow. It will be found there when I am laid out for the grave—and then, Eustace, when it is too late for hope or help, my letter will be given to you.

"Yes: I have had enough of my life. Yes: I mean to die.

"I have already sacrificed everything but my life to my love for you. Now I know that my love is not returned, the last sacrifice left is easy. My death will set you free to marry Mrs. Beaulieu.

"You don't know what it cost me to control my hatred of her, and to beg her to pay her visit here, without minding my illness. I could never have done it if I had not been so fond of you, and so fearful of irritating you against me by showing my jealousy. And how did you reward me? Let your Diary answer! 'I tenderly embraced her, this very morning; and I hope, poor soul, she did not discover the effort that it cost me.'

"Well, I have discovered it now. I know that you privately think your life with me 'a purgatory.' I know that you have compassionately hidden from me the 'sense of shrinking that comes over you when you are obliged to submit to my caresses.' I am nothing but an obstacle—an 'utterly distasteful' obstacle—between you and the woman whom you love so dearly that you 'adore the earth which she touches with her foot.' Be it so! I will stand in your way no longer. It is no sacrifice and no merit on my part. Life is unendurable to me, now I know that the man whom I love with all my heart and soul, secretly shrinks from me whenever I touch him.

"I have got the means of death close at hand.

"The arsenic that I twice asked you to buy for me is in my dressing case. I deceived you when I mentioned some commonplace domestic reasons for wanting it. My true reason was to try if I could not improve my ugly complexion—not from any vain feeling of mine; only to make myself look better and more lovable in your eyes. I have taken some of it for that purpose; but I have got plenty left to kill myself with. The poison will have its use at last. It might have failed to improve my complexion. It will not fail to relieve you of your ugly wife.

"Don't let me be examined after death. Show this letter to the doctor who attends me. It will tell him that I have committed suicide; it will prevent any innocent persons from being suspected of poisoning me. I want nobody to be blamed or punished. I shall remove the chemist's label, and carefully empty the bottle containing the poison, so that he may not suffer on my account.

"I must wait here, and rest a little while—then take up my letter again. It is far too long already. But these are my farewell words. I may surely dwell a little on my last talk with you!

"October 21. Two o'clock in the morning.

"I sent you out of the room yesterday, when you came in to ask how I had passed the night. And I spoke of you shamefully, Eustace, after you had gone, to the hired nurse who attends on me. Forgive me. I am almost beside myself now. You know why.

"Half-past three.

"Oh, my husband, I have done the deed which will relieve you of the wife whom you hate! I have taken the poison—all of it that was left in the paper packet, which was the first that I found. If this is not enough to kill me, I have more left in the bottle.

"Ten minutes past five.

"You have just gone, after giving me my composing draught. My courage failed me at the sight of you. I thought to myself, 'If he looks at me kindly, I will confess what I have

done, and let him save my life.' You never looked at me at all. You only looked at the medicine. I let you go, without saying a word.

"Half-past five.

"I begin to feel the first effects of the poison. The nurse is asleep at the foot of my bed. I won't call for assistance; I won't wake her. I will die.

"Half-past nine.

"The agony was beyond my endurance—I woke the nurse. I have seen the doctor.

"Nobody suspects anything. Strange to say the pain has left me; I have evidently taken too little of the poison. I must open the bottle which contains the larger quantity. Fortunately, you are not near me—my resolution to die, or rather, my loathing of life, remains as bitterly unaltered as ever. To make sure of my courage, I have forbidden the nurse to send for you. She has just gone downstairs by my orders. I am free to get the poison out of my dressing-case.

"Ten minutes to ten.

"I had just time to hide the bottle (after the nurse had left me), when you came into my room.

"I had another moment of weakness when I saw you. I determined to give myself a last chance of life. That is to say, I determined to offer you a last opportunity of treating me kindly. I asked you to get me a cup of tea. If, in paying me this little attention, you only encouraged me by one fond word or one fond look, I resolved not to take the other dose of poison.

"You obeyed my wishes, but you were not kind. You gave me my tea, Eustace, as if you were giving a drink to your dog. And then you wondered in a languid way (thinking, I suppose of Mrs. Beaulieu all the time), at my dropping the cup in handing it back to you. I really could not help it; my hand would tremble. In my place, your hand might have trembled, too—with the arsenic under the bedclothes. You politely hoped, before you went away, that the tea would do me good—and, oh God, you could not even look at me when you said that! You looked at the broken bits of the tea-cup.

"The instant you were out of the room I took the poison—a double dose this time.

"I have a little request to make here, while I think of it.

"After removing the label from the bottle, and putting it back, clean, in my dressing-case, it struck me that I had failed to take the same precaution (in the early morning) with the empty paper-packet, bearing on it the name of the other chemist. I threw it aside on the counterpane of the bed, among some other loose papers. My ill-tempered nurse complained of the litter, and crumpled them all up, and put them away somewhere. I hope the chemist will not suffer through my carelessness. Pray bear it in mind to say that he is not to blame.

"Dexter—something reminds me of Miserrimus Dexter. He has put your Diary back again in the drawer, and he presses me for an answer to his proposals. Has this false wretch any conscience? If he has, even he will suffer—when my death answers him.

"The nurse has been in my room again, I have sent her away. I have told her I want to be alone.

"How is the time going? I cannot find my watch. Is the pain coming back again, and paralysing me? I don't feel it keenly yet.

"It may come back, though, at any moment. I have still to close my letter, and to address it to you. And, besides, I must save up my strength to hide it under the pillow, so that nobody may find it until after my death.

"Farewell, my dear. I wish I had been a prettier woman. A more loving woman (towards you) I could not be. Even now, I dread the sight of your dear face. Even now, if I allowed myself the luxury of looking at you, I don't know that you might not charm me into confessing what I have done—before it is too late to save me.

"But you are not here. Better as it is! Better as it is!

"Once more, farewell! Be happier than you have been with me. I love you, Eustace—I forgive you. When you have nothing else to think about, think sometimes, as kindly as you can, of your poor ugly

"SARA MACALLAN."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

WHAT ELSE COULD I DO?

As soon as I could dry my eyes and compose my spirits, after reading the wife's pitiable and dreadful farewell, my first thought was of Eustace—my first anxiety was to prevent him from ever reading what I had read.

* Note by Mr. Playmore:—

The lost words and phrases supplied in this concluding portion of the letter are so few in number that it is needless to mention them. The fragments which were found accidentally stuck together by the gum, and which represent the part of the letter first completely reconstructed, begin at the phrase, "I spoke of you shamefully, Eustace," and end with the broken sentence "If in paying me this little attention, you only encouraged me by one fond word or one fond look, I resolved not to take—" With the assistance thus afforded to us, the labour of putting together the concluding half of the letter (dated "October 20th") was trifling compared with the almost insurmountable difficulties which we encountered in dealing with the scattered wreck of the preceding pages.

Yes! to this end it had come. I had devoted my life to the attainment of one object; and that object I had gained. There, on the table before me, lay the triumphant vindication of my husband's innocence; and, in mercy to him, in mercy to the memory of his dead wife, my one hope was that he might never see it! My one desire was to hide it from the public view!

I looked back at the strange circumstances under which the letter had been discovered.

It was all my doing—as the lawyer had said. And yet, what I had done, I had, so to speak, done blindfold. The merest accident might have altered the whole course of later events. I had over and over again interfered to check Ariel, when she entreated the Master to "tell her a story." If she had not succeeded, in spite of my opposition, Miserrimus Dexter's last effort of memory might never have been directed to the tragedy at Gleninch. And again, if I had only remembered to move my chair, and so to give Benjamin the signal to leave off, he would never have written down the apparently senseless words which have led us to the discovery of the truth.

Looking back at events in this frame of mind, the very sight of the letter sickened and horrified me. I cursed the day which had disinterred the fragments of it from their foul tomb. Just at the time when Eustace had found his weary way back to health and strength; just at the time when we were united again and happy again—when a month or two more might make us father and mother, as well as husband and wife—that frightful record of suffering and sin had risen against us like an avenging spirit. There it faced me on the table, threatening my husband's tranquillity; nay, for all I knew (if he read it at the present critical stage of his recovery), even threatening his life!

The hour struck from the clock on the mantel-piece. It was Eustace's time for paying me his morning visit, in my own little room. He might come in at any moment; he might see the letter; he might snatch the letter out of my hand. In a frenzy of terror and loathing, I caught up the vile sheets of paper, and threw them into the fire. It was a fortunate thing that a copy only had been sent to me. If the original letter had been in its place, I believe I should have burnt the original at that moment. The last morsel of paper had been barely consumed by the flames when the door opened and Eustace came in.

He glanced at the fire. The black cinders of the burnt paper were still floating at the back of the grate. He had seen the letter brought to me at the breakfast table. Did he suspect what I had done? He said nothing—he stood gravely looking into the fire. Then he advanced and fixed his eyes on me. I suppose I was very pale. The first words he spoke were words which asked me if I felt ill.

I was determined not to deceive him, even in the merest trifle.

"I am feeling a little nervous, Eustace," I answered. "That is all!"

He looked at me again, as if he expected me to say something more. I remained silent. He took a letter out of the breast-pocket of his coat, and laid it on the table before me—just where the Confession had lain before I destroyed it!

"I have had a letter, too, this morning," he said. "And I, Valeria, have no secrets from you."

CHAPTER XLVIII.—(continued).

WHAT ELSE COULD I DO.

I understood the reproach which my husband's last words conveyed; but I made no attempt to answer him.

"Do you wish me to read it?" was all I said, pointing to the envelope which he had laid on the table.

"I have already said that I have no secrets from you," he repeated. "The envelope is open. See for yourself what is enclosed in it."

I took out—not a letter, but a printed paragraph, cut from a Scotch newspaper.

"Read it," said Eustace.

I read as follows:

"STRANGE DOINGS AT GLENINCH.—A romance in real life seems to be in course of progress at Mr. Macallan's country house. Private excavations are taking place—if our readers will pardon us the unsavoury allusion?—at the dust-heap, of all places in the world! Something has assuredly been discovered; but nobody knows what. This alone is certain: For weeks past, two strangers from London (superintended by our respected fellow-citizen, Mr. Playmore) have been at work night and day in the library at Gleninch, with the door locked. Will the secret ever be revealed? And will it throw any light on a mysterious and shocking event which our readers have learnt to associate with the past history of Gleninch? Perhaps when Mr. Macallan returns, he may be able to answer these questions. In the meantime, we can only await events."

I laid the newspaper slip on the table, in no very Christian frame of mind towards the persons concerned in producing it. Some reporter in search of news had evidently been prying about the grounds at Gleninch, and some busybody in the neighbourhood had in all probability sent the published paragraph to Eustace. Entirely at a loss what to do, I waited for my husband to speak. He did not keep me in suspense—he questioned me instantly.

"Do you understand what it means, Valeria?"

I answered honestly—I owned that I understood what it meant.

He waited again as if he expected me to say more. I still kept the only refuge left to me—the refuge of silence.

"Am I to know no more than I know?" he proceeded, after an interval. "Are you not bound to tell me what is going on in my own house?"

It is a common remark that people, if they can think at all, think quickly in emergencies. There was but one way out of the embarrassing position in which my husband's last words had placed me. My instincts showed me the way, I suppose. At any rate, I took it.

"You have promised to trust me," I began.

He admitted that he had promised.

"I must ask you, for your own sake, Eustace, to trust me for a little while longer. I will satisfy you if you will only give me time."

His face darkened. "How much longer must I wait?" he asked.

I saw that the time had come for trying some stronger form of persuasion than words.

"Kiss me," I said, "before I tell you!"

He hesitated (so like a husband!) And I persisted (so like a wife!) There was no choice for him but to yield. Having given me my kiss (not over-graciously), he insisted once more on knowing how much longer I wanted him to wait.

"I want you to wait," I answered, "until our child is born."

He started. My condition took him by surprise. I gently pressed his hand, and gave him a look. He returned the look, warmly enough, this time, to satisfy me. "Say you consent," I whispered.

He consented.

So I put off the day of reckoning once more. So I gained time to consult again with Benjamin and Mr. Playmore.

While Eustace remained with me in the room, I was composed, and capable of talking to him. But when he left me, after a time, to think over what had passed between us, and to remember how kindly he had given way to me, my heart turned pityingly to those other wives (better women, some of them, than I am), whose husbands, under similar circumstances, would have spoken hard words to them, would, perhaps, even have acted more cruelly still. The contrast thus suggested between their fate and mine quite overcame me. What had I done to deserve my happiness? What had they done, poor souls, to deserve their misery? My nerves were overwrought, I dare say, after reading the dreadful confession of Eustace's first wife. I burst out crying, and I was all the better for it afterwards!

CHAPTER XLIX.

PAST AND FUTURE.

I write from memory, unassisted by notes or diaries; and I have no distinct recollection of the length of our residence abroad. It certainly extended over a period of some months. Long after Eustace was strong enough to take the journey to London, the doctors persisted in keeping him in Paris. He had shown symptoms of weakness in one of his lungs, and his medical advisers, seeing that he prospered in the dry atmosphere of France, warned him to be careful of breathing too soon the moist air of his own country.

Thus it happened that we were still in Paris when I received my next news from Gleninch. This time no letters passed on either side. To my surprise and delight, Benjamin quietly made his appearance one morning in our pretty French drawing-room. He was so preternaturally smart in his dress, and so incomprehensibly anxious (while my husband was in the way) to make us understand that his reasons for visiting Paris were holiday reasons only, that I at once suspected him of having crossed the Channel in a double character—say, as tourist in search of pleasure, when third persons were present; as ambassador from Mr. Playmore, when he and I had the room to ourselves.

Later in the day I contrived that we should be left together, and I soon found that my anticipations had not misled me. Benjamin had set out for Paris, at Mr. Playmore's express request, to consult with me as to the future, and to enlighten me as to the past. He presented me with his credentials, in the shape of a little note from the lawyer.

"There are some few points," Mr. Playmore wrote, "which the recovery of the letter does not seem to clear up. I have done my best, with Mr. Benjamin's assistance, to find the right explanation of these debatable matters, and I have treated the subject, for the sake of brevity, in the form of Questions and Answers. Will you accept me as interpreter, after the mistakes I made when you consulted me in Edinburgh? Events, I admit, have proved that I was entirely wrong in trying to prevent you from returning to Dexter—and partially wrong in suspecting Dexter of being directly, instead of indirectly, answerable for the first Mrs. Eustace's death! I frankly make my confession, and leave you to tell Mr. Benjamin whether you think my new Catechism worthy of examination or not."

I thought his "new Catechism," as he called it, decidedly worthy of examination. If you don't agree with this view, and if you are dying

* Note by Mr. Playmore:—

The greatest difficulties of re-construction occurred in this first portion of the torn letter. In the fourth paragraph from the beginning, we have been obliged to supply lost words in no less than three places. In the ninth, tenth, and seventeenth paragraphs the same proceeding was, in a greater or less degree, found to be necessary. In all these cases, the utmost pains have been taken to supply the deficiency in exact accordance with what appeared to be the meaning of the writer, as indicated in the existing pieces of the manuscript.