

THE LAW AND THE LADY: A NOVEL.

By WILKIE COLLINS.

AUTHOR OF "THE WOMAN IN WHITE," "THE MOONSTONE," "THE NEW MAGDALEN," ETC.

(From Author's MS. and Advance Sheets)

(ENTERED according to Act of Parliament of Canada, in the year 1874, by WILKIE COLLINS, in the Office of the Minister of Agriculture.)

Part I.—Paradise Lost

CHAPTER XIX.

THE WOMAN'S ANSWER.

The firm consisted of two partners. They both received me together. One was a soft lean man with a sour smile. The other was a hard fat man, with ill-tempered eyebrows. I took a great dislike to both of them. On their side, they appeared to feel a strong distrust of me. We began by disagreeing. They showed me my husband's instructions; providing, among other things, for the payment of one clear half of his income, as long as he lived, to his wife. I positively refused to touch a farthing of his money.

The lawyers were unaffectedly shocked and astonished at this decision. Nothing of the sort had ever happened before, in the whole course of their experience. They argued and remonstrated with me. The partner with the sour smile reminded his colleague satirically that I was a lady, and had therefore no reason to give. I only answered, "Be so good as to forward my letter, gentlemen"—and left them.

I have no wish to claim any credit to myself in these pages, which I do not honestly deserve. The truth is that my pride forbade me to accept help from Eustace, now that he had left me. My own little fortune (eight hundred a year) had been settled on myself when I married. It had been more than I wanted as a single woman, and I was resolved that it should be enough for me now. Benjamin had insisted on my considering his cottage as my home. Under these circumstances, the expenses in which my determination to clear my husband's character might involve me, were the only expenses for which I had to provide. I could afford to be independent—and independent I resolved that I would be.

While I am occupied in confessing my weakness and my errors, it is only right to add that, dearly as I still loved my unhappy misguided husband, there was one little fault of his which I found it not easy to forgive.

Pardoning other things, I could not quite pardon his concealing from me that he had been married to a first wife. Why I should have felt this so bitterly as I did, at certain times and seasons, I am not able to explain. Jealousy was at the bottom of it, I suppose. And yet, I was not conscious of being jealous—especially when I thought of the poor creature's miserable death. Still, Eustace ought not to have kept that secret from me—I used to think to myself, at odd times when I was discouraged and out of temper. What would he have said, if I had been a widow, and had never told him of it?

It was getting on towards evening when I returned to the cottage. Benjamin appeared to have been on the look-out for me. Before I could ring at the bell, he opened the garden-gate.

"Prepare yourself for a surprise, my dear," he said. "Your uncle, the Reverend Doctor Starkweather, has arrived from the North, and is waiting to see you. He received your letter this morning, and he took the first train to London as soon as he had read it."

In another minute, my uncle's strong arms were round me. In my forlorn position, I felt the good vicar's kindness. In travelling all the way to London to see me, very gratefully. It brought the tears into my eyes—tears, without bitterness, that did me good.

"I have come, my dear child, to take you back to your old home," he said. "No words can tell how fervently I wish you had never left your aunt and me. Well! Well! we won't

at bottom. She would have travelled all the way along with me, if I would have let her. I said, 'Oh; you stop at home and look after the house and the parish; and I'll bring the child back.' You shall have your own bedroom, Valeria, with the white curtains, you know, looped up with blue! We will return to the Vicarage (if you can get up in time) by the nine-forty train, to-morrow morning."

Return to the Vicarage! How could I do that? How could I hope to gain what was now the one object of my existence, if I buried myself in a remote north-country village? It was simply impossible for me to accompany Doctor Starkweather on his return to his own house.

"I thank you, uncle, with all my heart," I

It was only due to my good guardian and friend that I should take him into my confidence sooner or later. There was no help for it, but to rouse my courage and tell him frankly what I had in my mind to do. The Vicar listened in breathless dismay. He turned to Benjamin, with distress as well as surprise in his face, when I had done.

"God help her!" cried the worthy man. "The poor thing's troubles have turned her brain!"

"I thought you would disapprove of it, sir," said Benjamin, in his mild and moderate way. "I confess I disapprove of it, myself."

"Disapprove of it, isn't the word," retorted the vicar. "Don't put it in that feeble way, if

you please. And act of madness, that's what it is, if she really means what she says." He turned my way, and looked as he used to look, at the afternoon service, when he was catechising an obstinate child. "You don't mean it," he said, "do you?"

"I am sorry to forfeit your good opinion, uncle," I replied. "But I must own that I do certainly mean it."

"In plain English," retorted the Vicar, "you are conceited enough to think that you can succeed where the greatest lawyers in Scotland have failed. They couldn't prove this man's innocence, all working together. And you are going to prove it single-handed? Upon my word, you are a wonderful woman," cried my uncle, suddenly descending from indignation to irony. "May a plain country person, who isn't used to lawyers in petticoats, be permitted to ask how you mean to do it?"

"I mean to begin by reading the Trial, uncle."

"Nice reading for a young woman! You will be wanting a batch of nasty French novels next. Well, and when you have read the Trial—what then? Have you thought of that?"

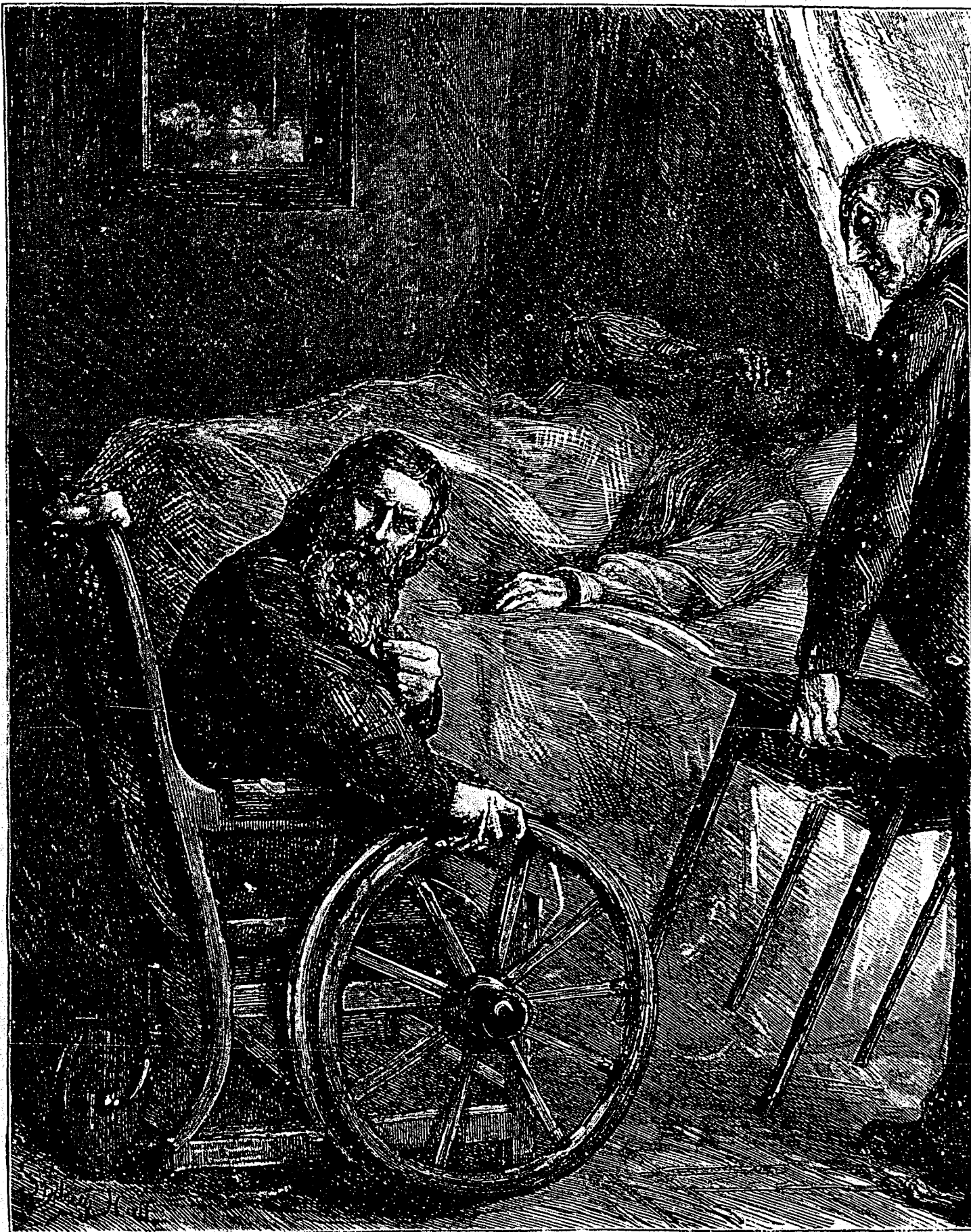
"Yes, uncle. I have thought of that. I shall first try to form some conclusion (after reading the Trial), as to the guilty person who really committed the crime. Then, I shall make up a list of the witnesses who spoke in my husband's defence. I shall go to those witnesses, and tell them who I am, and what I want. I shall ask all sorts of questions which grave lawyers might think it beneath their dignity to put. I shall be guided, in what I do next, by the answers I receive. And I shall not be discouraged no matter what difficulties are thrown in my way. Those are my plans, uncle, so far as I know them now."

The Vicar and Benjamin looked at each other, as if they doubted the evidence of their own senses. The Vicar spoke.

"Do you mean to tell me," he said, "that you are going roaming about the country, to

throw yourself on the mercy of strangers, and to risk whatever rough reception you may get in the course of your travels? You! A young woman! Deserted by your husband! With nobody to protect you! Mr. Benjamin, do you hear her? And can you believe your ears? I declare to Heaven I don't know whether I am awake or dreaming. Look at her, just look at her! There she sits as cool and easy as if she had said nothing at all extraordinary, and was going to do nothing out of the common way! What am I to do with her—that's the serious question—what on earth am I to do with her?"

"Let me try my experiment, uncle, rash as



"I took his chair and pulled it away, while Robert Lorrie laid hold of the table and carried it to the other end of the room."

talk about it. The mischief is done, and the next thing is to mend it as well as we can. If I could only get within arm's length of that husband of yours, Valeria—there! there! God forgive me, I am forgetting that I am a clergyman. What shall I forget next, I wonder? By the bye, your aunt sends you her dearest love. She is more superstitious than ever. This miserable business doesn't surprise her a bit. She says it all began with your making that mistake about your name, in signing the church register. You remember? Was there ever such stuff? Ah, she's a foolish woman, that wife of mine! But she means well, a good soul

said. "But I am afraid I can't leave London for the present."

"You can't leave London for the present!" he repeated. "What does the girl mean, Mr. Benjamin?"

Benjamin evaded a direct reply.

"She's kindly welcome, here, Doctor Starkweather," he said, "as long as she chooses to stay with me."

"That's no answer," retorted my uncle, in his rump-and-ready way. He turned to me. "What is there to keep you in London?" he asked. "You used to hate London. I suppose there is some reason?"