

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 II.—PARADISE REGAINED.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IN THE DARK.

He resumed his childish ways; he recovered his innocent smile, with the odd little puckers and wrinkles accompanying it at the corners of his eyes. I began to doubt whether I might not have been unreasonably hard on him. I penitently resolved to be more considerate towards his infirmities of mind and body, during the remainder of my visit.

"Let me go back for a moment, Mr. Dexter, to past times at Gleninch," I said. "You agree with me in believing Eustace to be absolutely innocent of the crime for which he was tried. Your evidence at the Trial tells me that."

He paused over his work, and looked at me with a grave and stern attention which presented his face in quite a new light.

"That is our opinion," I resumed. "But it was not the opinion of the Jury. Their verdict, you remember, was Not Proven—in plain English, the Jury who tried my husband declined to express their opinion, positively and publicly, that he was innocent. Am I right?"

Instead of answering, he suddenly put his embroidery in the basket, and moved the machinery of his chair so as to bring it close to mine.

"Who told you this?" he asked.

"I found it for myself in a book."

Thus far his face had expressed steady attention, and no more. Now for the first time, I thought I saw something darkly passing over him which betrayed itself to my mind as rising distrust.

"Ladies are not generally in the habit of troubling their heads about dry questions of law," he said. "Mrs. Eustace Macallan the second, you must have some very powerful motive for turning your studies that way."

"I have a very powerful motive, Mr. Dexter. My husband is resigned to the Scotch Verdict. His mother is resigned to it. His friends (so far as I know) are resigned to it—"

"Well?"

"Well! I don't agree with my husband, or his mother, or his friends. I refuse to submit to the Scotch verdict."

The instant I said those words, the madness in him which I had hitherto denied seemed to break out. He suddenly stretched himself over his chair; he pounced on me, with a hand on each of my shoulders, his wild eyes questioned me fiercely, frantically, within a few inches of my face.

"What do you mean?" he shouted at the utmost pitch of his ringing and resonant voice.

A deadly fear of him shook me. I did my best to hide the outward betrayal of it. By look and word I showed him, as firmly as I could, that I resented the liberty he had taken with me.

"Remove your hands, sir," I said. "And retire to your proper place."

He obeyed me mechanically. He apologised to me mechanically. His whole mind was evidently still filled with the words that I had spoken to him, and still bent on discovering what those words meant.

"I beg your pardon," he said; "I humbly beg your pardon. The subject excites me, frightens me, maddens me. You don't know what a difficulty I have in controlling myself. Never mind. Don't take me seriously. Don't be frightened at me. I am so ashamed of myself—I feel so small and so miserable at having offended you. Make me suffer for it. Take a stick and beat me. Tie me down in my chair. Call up Ariel, who is as strong as a horse, and tell her to hold me. Dear Mrs. Valeria! Injured Mrs. Valeria! I'll endure anything in the way of punishment, if you will only tell me what you mean by not submitting to the Scotch Verdict?" He backed his chair penitently, as he made that entreaty. "Am I far enough away yet?" he asked, with a rueful look. "Do I still frighten you? I'll drop out of sight, if you prefer it, in the bottom of the chair."

He lifted the sea-green coverlid. In another moment he would have disappeared like a puppet in a show, if I had not stopped him.

"Say nothing more, and do nothing more; I accept your apologies," I said. "When I tell you that I refuse to submit to the opinion of the Scotch Jury, I mean exactly what my words express. That verdict has left a stain on my husband's character. He feels the stain bitterly. How bitterly no one knows so well as I do. His sense of his degradation is the sense that has parted him from me. It is not enough for him that I am persuaded of his innocence. Nothing will bring him back to me—nothing will persuade Eustace that I think him worthy to be the guide and companion of my life—but the proof of his innocence, set before the jury which doubts it, and the public which doubts it, to this day. He, and his friends, and his lawyers, all despair of ever finding that proof, now. But I am his wife; and none of you love him as I love him. I alone refuse to despair; I alone refuse to listen to reason. If God spares me, Mr. Dexter, I dedicate my life to the vindication of my husband's innocence. You are his old friend—I am here to ask you to help me."

It appeared to be now my turn to frighten him. The colour left his face. He passed his hand restlessly over his forehead, as if he was trying to brush some delusion out of his brain.

"Is this one of my dreams?" he asked faintly. "Are you a vision of the night?"

"I am only a friendless woman," I said, "who has lost all that she loved and prized, and who is trying to win it back again."

He began to move his chair nearer to me once more. I lifted my hand. He stopped the chair directly. There was a moment of silence. We sat watching one another. I saw his hands tremble as he laid them on the coverlid; I saw his face grow paler and paler, and his under lip drop. What dead and buried remembrances had I brought to life in him, in all their olden horror?

He was the first to speak again.

"So this is your interest," he said, "in clearing up the mystery of Mrs. Eustace Macallan's death?"

"Yes."

"And you believe that I can help you?"

"I do."

He slowly lifted one of his hands, and pointed at me with his long forefinger.

"You suspect somebody," he said.

The tone in which he spoke was low and threatening; it warned me to be careful. At the same time, if I now shut him out of my confidence, I should lose the reward that might yet be to come, for all that I had suffered and risked at that perilous interview.

"You suspect somebody," he repeated.

"Perhaps!" was all I said in return.

"Is the person within your reach?"

"Not yet."

"Do you know where the person is?"

"No."

He laid his head languidly on the back of his chair, with a trembling, long-drawn sigh. Was he disappointed? Or was he relieved? Or was he simply exhausted in mind and body alike? Who could fathom him—who could say?

"Will you give me five minutes?" he asked, feebly and wearily, without raising his head.

"You know already how any reference to events at Gleninch excites and shakes me. I shall be fit for it again if you will kindly give me a few minutes to myself. There are books in the next room. Please excuse me."

I at once retired to the circular ante-chamber. He followed me in his chair, and closed the door between us.

CHAPTER XXIX.

IN THE LIGHT.

A little interval of solitude was a relief to me, as well as to Miserrimus Dexter.

Startling doubts beset me as I walked restlessly backwards and forwards, now in the ante-room, and now in the corridor outside. It was plain that I had (quite innocently) disturbed the repose of some formidable secrets in Miserrimus Dexter's mind. I confused and wearied my poor brains in trying to guess what the secrets might be. All my ingenuity—as afterwards showed me—was wasted on speculations not one of which even approached the truth. I was on surer ground when I arrived at the conclusion that Dexter had really kept every mortal creature out of his confidence.

He could never have betrayed such serious signs of disturbance as I had noticed in him, if he had publicly acknowledged at the Trial, or if he had privately communicated to any chosen friend, all that he knew of the tragic and terrible drama acted in the bedchamber at Gleninch.

What powerful influence had induced him to close his lips? Had he been silent in mercy to others, or in dread of consequences to himself? Impossible to tell. Could I hope that he would confide to me what he had kept secret from Justice and Friendship alike? When he really knew what I really wanted of him would he arm me, out of his own stores of knowledge, with the weapon that would win me victory in the struggle to come? The chances were all against it, there was no denying that. Still, the end was worth trying for. The caprice of the moment might yet stand my friend, with such a wayward being as Miserrimus Dexter. My plans and projects were sufficiently strange, sufficiently wide of the ordinary limits of a woman's thoughts and actions, to attract his sympathies. "Who knows," I thought to myself, "if I may not take his confidence by surprise, by simply telling him the truth."

The interval expired, the door was thrown open, the voice of my host summoned me again to the inner room.

"Welcome back," said Miserrimus Dexter.

"Dear Mrs. Valeria, I am quite myself again. How are you?"

He looked and spoke with the easy cordiality of an old friend. During the period of my absence, short as it was, another change had passed over this most multifarious of living beings. His eyes sparkled with good humour; his cheeks were flushing under a new excitement of some sort. Even his dress had undergone alteration since I had seen it last. He now wore an extemporised cap of white paper; his ruffles were tucked up; a clean apron was thrown over the sea-green coverlid. He backed his chair before me, bowing and smiling, and waved me to a seat with the grace of a dancing-master, chastened by the dignity of a lord in waiting.

"I am going to cook," he announced, with the most engaging simplicity. "We both stand in need of refreshment, before we return to the serious business of our interview. You see me in my cook's dress—forgive it. There is a form in these things; I am a great stickler for forms. I have been taking some wine. Please sanction that proceeding by taking some wine too."

He filled a goblet of ancient Venetian glass with a purple-red liquor, beautiful to see.

"Burgundy," he said. "The King of Wines. And this is the king of Burgundies—Clos Vougeot. I drink to your health and happiness."

He filled a goblet for himself, and honoured the toast by draining it to the bottom. I now understood the sparkle in his eyes and the flush in his cheeks. It was my interest not to offend him. I drank a little of his wine, and I quite agreed with him—I thought it delicious.

"What shall we eat?" he asked. "It must be something worthy of our Clos Vougeot. Ariel is good at roasting and boiling joints, poor wretch. But I don't insult your taste by offering you Ariel's cookery. Plain joints!" he exclaimed, with an expression of refined disgust.

"Bah! A man who eats a plain joint is only one remove from a cannibal, or a butcher. Will you leave it to me to discover something more worthy of us? Let us go to the kitchen."

He wheeled his chair round, and invited me to accompany him with a courteous wave of the hand.

I followed the chair to some closed curtains at the end of the room, which I had not hitherto noticed. Drawing aside the curtains, he revealed to view an alcove, in which stood a neat little gas stove for cooking. Drawers and cupboards, plates, dishes, and saucepans were ranged round the alcove, all on a miniature scale, all scrupulously bright and clean. "Welcome to the kitchen," said Miserrimus Dexter. He drew out of a recess in the wall a marble slab which served as a table, and reflected profoundly with his hand to his head. "I have it," he cried—and opening one of the cupboards next, took from it a black bottle of a form that was new to me. Sounding this bottle with a spike, he pierced and presented to view some little irregularly-formed black objects, which might have been familiar enough to a woman accustomed to the luxurious tables of the rich, but which were a new revelation to a person like myself, who had led a simple country life in the house of a clergyman with small means.

When I saw my host carefully lay out these occult substances, of uninviting appearance, on a clean napkin, and then plunge once more into profound reflection at the sight of them, my curiosity could no longer be restrained. I ventured to say, "What are those things, Mr. Dexter—and are we really going to eat them?"

He started at the rash question, and looked at me, with hands outspread in irrepressible astonishment.

"Where is our boasted progress?" he cried.

"What is education but a name? Here is a cultivated person who doesn't know Truffles when she sees them!"

"I have heard of truffles," I answered humbly. "But I never saw them before. We had no such foreign luxuries as those, Mr. Dexter, in the North."

Miserrimus Dexter lifted one of the truffles tenderly on his spike, and held it up to me in a favourable light.

"Make the most of one of the few first sensations in this life, which has no ingredient of disappointment lurking under the surface," he said. "Look at it—meditate over it. You shall eat it, Mrs. Valeria, stewed in Burgundy."

He lit the gas for cooking, with the air of a man who was about to offer me an inestimable proof of his good-will.

"Forgive me if I observe the most absolute silence," he said, "dating from the moment when I take this in my hand." He produced a bright little stew-pan from his collection of culinary utensils as he spoke. "Properly pursued the Art of Cookery allows of no divided attention," he continued gravely. "In that observation you will find the reason why no woman ever has reached, or ever will reach, the highest distinction as a cook. As a rule women are incapable of absolutely concentrating their attention on any one occupation for any given time. Their mind will run on something else—say, typically, for the sake of illustration, their sweetheart or their new bonnet. The one obstacle, Mrs. Valeria, to your rising equal to the men in the various industrial processes of life is not raised, as the women vainly suppose, by the defective institutions of the age they live in. No! the obstacle is in themselves. No institutions that can be devised to encourage them will ever be strong enough to contend successfully with the sweetheart and the new bonnet. A little while ago, for instance, I was instrumental in getting women employed in our local post-office here. The other day I took the trouble—a serious business to me—of getting downstairs, and wheeling myself away to the office to see how they were getting on. I took a letter with me to register. It had an unusually long address. The registering-woman began copying the address on the receipt-form, in a business-like manner cheering and delightful to see. Half-way through, a little child—sister of one of the other women employed trotted into the office, and popped under the counter to go and speak to her relative. The registering-woman's mind instantly gave way. Her pencil stopped; her eyes wandered off to the child, with a

charming expression of interest. 'Well, Lucy,' she said, 'how-d'ye-do?' Then she remembered business again, and returned to her receipt. When I took it across the counter, an important line in the address of my letter was left out in the copy. Thanks to Lucy. Now a man in the same position would not have seen Lucy—he would have been too closely occupied with what he was about at the moment. There is the whole difference between the mental constitution of the sexes, which no legislation will ever alter as long as the world lasts. What does it matter? Women are infinitely superior to men in the moral qualities which are the true adornments of humanity. Be content—oh, my mistaken sisters, be content with that!"

He twisted his chair round towards the stove. It was useless to dispute the question with him, even if I had felt inclined to do so. He absorbed himself in his stew-pan.

I looked about me in the room. The same insatiable relish for horrors exhibited downstairs by the pictures in the hall, was displayed again here. The photographs hanging on the wall, represented the various forms of madness taken from the life. The plaster casts ranged on the shelf opposite, were casts (after death) of the heads of famous murderers. A frightful little skeleton of a woman hung in a cupboard, behind a glazed door, with this cynical inscription placed above the skull—"Behold the scaffolding on which beauty is built!" In a corresponding cupboard, with the door wide open, there hung in loose folds a shirt (as I took it to be) of chamols leader. Touching it (and finding it to be far softer than any chamols leather that my fingers had ever felt before), I disarranged the folds, and disclosed a ticket pinned among them, describing the thing in these horrid lines:—"Skin of a French Marquis, tanned in the Revolution of Ninety Three. Who says the nobility are not good for something? They make good leather."

After this last specimen of my host's taste in curiosities, I pursued my investigation no farther. I returned to my chair, and waited for the Truffles.

After a brief interval, the voice of the poet-painter-composer-and-cook summoned me back to the alcove.

The gas was out. The stew-pan and its accompaniments had vanished. On the marble slab were two plates, two napkins, two rolls of bread—and a dish, with another napkin in it, on which reposed two quaint little black balls. Miserrimus Dexter, regarding me with a smile of benevolent interest, put one of the balls on my plate, and took the other himself. "Compose yourself, Mrs. Valeria," he said. "This is an epoch in your life. Your first Truffle! Don't touch it with the knife. Use the fork alone. And—pardon me; this is most important—eat slowly."

I followed my instructions, and assumed an enthusiasm which I honestly confess I did not feel. I privately thought the new vegetable a great deal too rich, and, in other respects, quite unworthy of the fuss that had been made about it. Miserrimus Dexter lingered and languished over his truffles, and sipped his wonderful Burgundy, and sang his own praises as a cook—until I was really almost mad with impatience to return to the real object of my visit. In the reckless state of mind which this feeling produced, I abruptly reminded my host that he was wasting our time, by the most dangerous question that I could possibly put to him.

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"A complete mistake?" he repeated. "Strange language, Mrs. Valeria, to say the least of it!" He tried to speak lightly; he took up his goblet of wine. But I could see that I had produced an effect on him. His hand trembled as it carried the wine to his lips.

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