

# THE LAW AND THE LADY: A NOVEL.

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## PART II.—PARADISE REGAINED.

### CHAPTER XXXIX.

#### ON THE WAY TO DEXTER.

He went away, so the housekeeper told me, with tears in his eyes, and oaths and curses on his lips—a sight shocking to see. That's all I know about the Person, ma'm, and I hope to be excused if I venture to say that the subject is (for good reasons) extremely disagreeable to me.

She made a formal curtsy, and quitted the room.

Left by myself, I felt more anxious and more uncertain than ever, when I thought of the experiment that was to be tried on the next day. Making due allowance for exaggeration, the description of Miserrimus Dexter, on his departure from Mrs. Macallan's house, suggested that he had not endured my long absence very patiently, and that he was still as far as ever from giving his shattered nervous system its fair chance of repose.

The next morning brought me Mr. Playmore's reply to the letter which I had addressed to him from Paris.

He wrote very briefly, neither approving nor blaming my decision, but strongly reiterating his opinion that I should do well to choose a competent witness as my companion at my coming interview with Dexter. The most interesting part of the letter was at the end. "You must be prepared," Mr. Playmore wrote, "to see a change for the worse in Dexter. A friend of mine was with him on a matter of business a few days since, and was struck by the alteration in him. Your presence is sure to have its effect, one way or another. I can give you no instructions for managing him—you must be guided by the circumstances. Your own tact will tell you whether it is wise, or not, to encourage him to speak of the late Mrs. Eustace. The chances of his betraying himself all revolve (as I think) round that one topic: keep him to it if you can." To this there was added, in a postscript:—"Ask Mr. Benjamin if he was near enough to the library door to hear Dexter tell you of his entering the bedchamber, on the night of Mrs. Eustace Macallan's death."

I put the question to Benjamin when we met at the luncheon-table, before setting forth for the distant suburb in which Miserrimus Dexter lived. My old friend disapproved of the contemplated expedition as strongly as ever. He was unusually grave and unusually sparing of his words, when he answered me.

"I am no listener," he said. "But some people have voices which insist on being heard. Mr. Dexter is one of them."

"Does that mean that you heard him?" I asked.

"The door couldn't muffle him, and the wall couldn't muffle him," Benjamin rejoined. "I heard him—and thought it infamous. There!"

"I may want you to do more than hear him, this time," I ventured to say. "I may want you to make notes of our conversation, while Mr. Dexter is speaking to me. You used to write down what my father said, when he was dictating his letters to you. Have you got one of your little note-books to spare?"

Benjamin looked up from his plate with an aspect of stern surprise.

"It's one thing," he said, "to write under the dictation of a great merchant, conducting a vast correspondence by which thousands of pounds change hands in due course of post. And it's another thing to take down the gibberish of a maundering mad monster who ought to be kept in a cage. Your good father, Valeria, would never have asked me to do that."

"Forgive me, Benjamin; I must really ask you to do it. It may be of the greatest possible use to me. Come! give way this once, dear, for my sake."

Benjamin looked down again at his plate, with a rueful resignation which told me that I had carried my point.

"I have been tied to her apron string all my life," I heard him grumble to himself. "And it's too late in the day to get loose from her now." He looked up again at me. "I thought I had retired from business," he said. "But it seems I must turn clerk again. Well? What is the new stroke of work that's expected from me, this time?"

The cab was announced to be waiting for us at the gate, as he asked the question. I rose and took his arm, and gave him a grateful kiss on his rosy old cheek.

"Only two things," I said. "Sit down behind Mr. Dexter's chair, so that he can't see you. But take care to place yourself, at the same time, so that you can see me."

"The less I see of Mr. Dexter, the better I shall be pleased," growled Benjamin. "What am I to do, after I have taken my place behind him?"

"You are to wait until I make you a sign; and when you see it you are to begin writing down in your note-book what Mr. Dexter is saying—and you are to go on, until I make another sign which means, Leave off!"

"Well?" said Benjamin, "What's the sign for, Begin? and what's the sign for, Leave off?"

I was not quite prepared with an answer to this. I asked him to help me with a hint. No! Benjamin would take no active part in the matter. He was resigned to be employed in the capacity of passive instrument—and there all concession ended, so far as he was concerned.

Left to my own resources, I found it no easy matter to invent a telegraphic system which should sufficiently inform Benjamin, without awakening Dexter's quick suspicion. I looked into the glass to see if I could find the necessary suggestion in anything that I wore. My earrings supplied me with the idea of which I was in search.

"I shall take care to sit in an arm-chair," I said. "When you see me rest my elbow on the chair, and lift my hand to my ear-ring, as if I was playing with it—write down what he says; and go on until—well, suppose we say, until you hear me move my chair. At that sound, stop. You understand me?"

"I understand you."

We started for Dexter's house.

### CHAPTER XL.

#### NEMESIS AT LAST!

The gardener opened the gate to us, on this occasion. He had evidently received his orders, in anticipation of my arrival.

"Mrs. Valeria?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And friend?"

"And friend."

"Please to step up stairs. You know the house."

Crossing the hall, I stopped for a moment, and looked at a favourite walking cane which Benjamin still kept in his hand.

"Your cane will only be in your way," I said. "Had you not better leave it here?"

"My cane may be useful upstairs," retorted Benjamin gruffly. "I haven't forgotten what happened in the library."

It was no time to contend with him. I led the way up the stairs.

Arriving at the upper flight of steps, I was startled by hearing a sudden cry from the room above. It was like the cry of a person in pain; and it was twice repeated, before we entered the circular antechamber. I was the first to approach the inner room, and to see the many-sided Miserrimus Dexter in another new aspect of his character.

The unfortunate Ariel was standing before a table with a dish of little cakes placed in front of her. Round each of her wrists was tied a string, the free ends of which (at a distance of a few yards) were held in Miserrimus Dexter's hands. "Try again, my beauty!" I heard him say, as I stopped on the threshold of the door. "Take a cake." At the word of command, Ariel submissively stretched out one arm towards the dish. Just as she touched a cake with the tips of her fingers, her hand was jerked away by a pull at the string, so savagely cruel in the nimble and devilish violence of it, that I felt inclined to snatch Benjamin's cane out of his hand, and break it over Miserrimus Dexter's back. Ariel suffered the pain this time in Spartan silence. The position in which she stood enabled her to be the first to see me at the door. She had discovered me. Her teeth were set; her face was flushed under the struggle to restrain herself. Not even a sigh escaped her in my presence.

"Drop the string!" I called out indignantly. "Release her, Mr. Dexter, or I shall leave the house."

At the sound of my voice he burst out with a shrill cry of welcome. His eyes fastened on me with a fierce devouring delight.

"Come in! come in!" he cried. "See what I am reduced to, in the maddening suspense of waiting for you. See how I kill the time when the time parts us. Come in! come in! I am in one of my malicious humours this morning, caused entirely, Mrs. Valeria, by my anxiety to see you. When I am in my malicious humours I must tease something. I am teasing Ariel. Look at her! She has had nothing to eat all day, and she hasn't been quick enough to snatch a morsel of cake yet. You needn't pity her. Ariel has no nerves—I don't hurt her."

"Ariel has no nerves," echoed the poor creature, frowning at me for interfering between her master and herself. "He doesn't hurt me."

I heard Benjamin beginning to swing his cane behind me.

"Drop the string!" I reiterated more vehemently than ever. "Drop it—or I shall instantly leave you."

Miserrimus Dexter's delicate nerves shuddered at my voice. "What a glorious voice!" he exclaimed—and dropped the string. "Take the cakes," he added, addressing Ariel in his most imperial manner.

She passed me, with the strings hanging from her swollen wrists, and the dish of cakes in her hand. She nodded her head at me defiantly.

"Ariel has got no nerves," she repeated proudly. "He doesn't hurt me."

"You see," said Miserrimus Dexter, "there is no harm done—and I dropped the strings when you told me. Don't begin by being hard on me, Mrs. Valeria, after your long, long absence." He paused. Benjamin, standing silent in the doorway, attracted his attention for the first time. "Who is this?" he asked, and he wheeled his

chair suspiciously nearer to the door. "I know!" he cried, before I could answer. "This is the benevolent gentleman who looked like the refuge of the afflicted, when I saw him last. You have altered for the worse since then, sir. You have stepped into quite a new character—you personify Retributive Justice now. Your new protector, Mrs. Valeria—I understand!" He bowed low to Benjamin, with ferocious irony. "Your humble servant, Mr. Retributive Justice! I have deserved you—and I submit to you. Walk in, sir! I will take care that your new office shall be a sinecure. This lady is the Light of my Life. Catch me falling in respect to her, if you can!" He backed his chair before Benjamin (who listened to him in contemptuous silence) until he reached that part of the room in which I was standing. "Your hand, Light of my Life!" he murmured in his gentlest tones. "Your hand—only to show that you have forgiven me!"

I gave him my hand.

"One?" he whispered entreatingly. "Only one?"

He kissed my hand once, respectfully—and dropped it with a heavy sigh.

"Ah, poor Dexter!" he said, pitying himself with the whole sincerity of his egotism. "A warm heart, wasted in solitude, mocked by deformity. Sad! sad! Ah, poor Dexter!"

He looked round again at Benjamin, with another flash of his ferocious irony.

"A beautiful day, sir," he said, with mock-conventional courtesy.

"Seasonable weather, indeed, after the late long-continued rains. Can I offer you any refreshment? Won't you sit down? Retributive Justice, when it is no taller than you are, looks best in a chair."

"And a monkey looks best in a cage," rejoined Benjamin, enraged at the satirical reference to his shortness of stature. "I was waiting, sir, to see you get in to your swing."

The retort produced no effect on Miserrimus Dexter; it appeared to have passed by him unheard. He had changed again; he was thoughtful, he was subdued; his eyes were fixed on me with a sad and rapt attention. I took the nearest armchair; first casting a glance at Benjamin, which he immediately understood. He placed himself behind Dexter, at an angle which commanded a view of my chair. Ariel, silently devouring her cakes, crouched on a stool at "the Master's" feet, and looked up at him like a faithful dog. There was an interval of quiet and repose. I was able to observe Miserrimus Dexter uninterruptedly, for the first time since I had entered the room.

I was not surprised—I was nothing less than alarmed by the change for the worse in him since we had last met. Mr. Playmore's letter had not prepared me for the serious deterioration in him which I could now discern.

His features were pinched and worn; the whole face seemed to have wasted strangely in substance and size since I had last seen it. The softness in his eyes was gone. Blood-red veins were interwoven all over them now; they were set in a piteous and vacant stare. His once firm hands looked withered; they trembled as they lay on the coverlid. The paleness of his face exaggerated perhaps by the black velvet jacket that he wore) had a sallow and sickly look—the fine outline was gone. The multitudinous little wrinkles at the corners of his eyes had deepened. His head sank into his shoulders when he leaned forward in his chair. Years appeared to have passed over him, instead of months, while I had been absent from England. Remembering the medical report which Mr. Playmore had given me to read—remembering the doctor's positively declared opinion that the preservation of Dexter's sanity depended on the healthy condition of his nerves—I could not but feel that I had done wisely (if I might still hope for success) in hastening my return from Spain. Knowing what I knew, fearing what I feared, I believed that his time was near. I felt, when our eyes met by accident, that I was looking at a doomed man.

I pitied him.

Yes! yes! I know that compassion for him was utterly inconsistent with the doubt, still present to my mind, whether Mr. Playmore had really wronged him in believing that his was the guilt which had compassed the first Mrs. Eustace's death. I felt this: I knew him to be cruel, I believed him to be false. And yet, I pitied him! Is there a common fund of wickedness in us all? Is the suppression or the development of that wickedness a mere question of training and temptation? And is there something in our deeper sympathies which mutely acknowledges this, when we feel for the wicked; when we crowd to a criminal trial; when we shake hands at parting (if we happen to be present officially) with the vilest monster that ever swung on a gallows? It is not for me to decide. I can only say that I pitied Miserrimus Dexter—and that he found it out.

"Thank you," he said, suddenly. "You see I am ill, and you feel for me. Dear and good Valeria!"

"This lady's name, sir, is Mrs. Eustace Macallan," interposed Benjamin, speaking sternly behind him. "The next time you address her, remember, if you please, that you have no business with her Christian name."

Benjamin's rebuke passed, like Benjamin's retort, unheeded and unheard. To all appearance, Miserrimus Dexter had completely forgotten that there was such a person in the room.

"You have delighted me with the sight of you," he went on. "Add to the pleasure by letting me hear your voice. Talk to me of yourself. Tell me what you have been doing since you left England."

It was necessary to my object to set the conversation afloat; and this was as good a way of doing it as any other. I told him plainly how I had been employed during my absence.

"So you are still fond of Eustace?" he said bitterly.

"I love him more dearly than ever."

He lifted his hands, and hid his face. After waiting awhile, he went on; speaking in an odd muffled manner, still under cover of his hands.

"And you leave Eustace in Spain," he said; "and you return to England by yourself! What made you do that?"

"What made me first come here, and ask you to help me, Mr. Dexter?"

He dropped his hands, and looked at me. I saw in his eyes, not amazement only, but alarm.

"Is it possible," he exclaimed, "that you won't let that miserable matter rest even yet? Are you still determined to penetrate the mystery at Gleninch?"

"I am still determined, Mr. Dexter; and I still hope that you may be able to help me."

The old distrust that I remembered so well, darkened again over his face the moment I said those words.

"How can I help you?" he asked. "Can I alter facts?" He stopped. His face brightened again, as if some sudden sense of relief had come to him. "I did try to help you," he went on. "I told you that Mrs. Beaulieu's absence was a device to screen herself from suspicion; I told you that the poison might have been given by Mrs. Beaulieu's maid. Has reflection convinced you? Do you see something in the idea?"

This return to Mrs. Beaulieu gave me my first chance of leading the talk to the right topic.

"I see nothing in the idea," I answered. "I see no motive. Had the maid any reason to be an enemy to the late Mrs. Eustace?"

"Nobody had any reason to be an enemy to the late Mrs. Eustace!" he broke out, loudly and vehemently. "She was all goodness, all kindness; she never injured any human creature in thought or deed. She was a saint upon earth. Respect her memory! Let the martyr rest in her grave!" He covered his face again with his hands, and I shook and shuddered under the paroxysm of emotion that I had roused in him.

Ariel suddenly and softly left her stool, and approached me.

"Do you see my ten claws?" she whispered, holding out her hands. "Vex the Master again—and you will feel my ten claws on your throat!"

Benjamin rose from his seat; he had seen the action, without hearing the words. I signed to him to keep his place. Ariel returned to her stool, and looked up again at her Master.

"Don't cry," she said. "Come on. Here are the strings. Teaze me again. Make me screech with the smart of it."

He never answered, and never moved.

Ariel bent her slow mind to meet the difficulty of attracting his attention. I saw it in her frowning brows, in her colourless eyes looking at me vacantly. On a sudden, she joyfully struck the open palm of one of her hands with the fist of the other. She had triumphed. She had got an idea.

"Master!" she cried. "Master! You haven't told me a story for ever so long. Puzzle my thick head. Make my flesh creep. Come on. A good long story. All blood and crimes."

Had she accidentally hit on the right suggestion to strike his wayward fancy? I knew his high opinion of his own skill in "dramatic narrative." I knew that one of his favourite amusements was to puzzle Ariel by telling her stories that she could not understand. Would he wander away into the regions of wild romance? Or would he remember that my obstinacy still threatened him with re-opening the inquiry into the tragedy at Gleninch? and would he set his cunning at work to mislead me by some new stratagem? This latter course was the course which my past experience of him suggested that he would take. But, to my surprise and alarm, I found my past experience at fault. Ariel succeeded in diverting his mind from the subject which had been in full possession of it the moment before she spoke! He showed his face again. It was overspread by a broad smile of gratified self-esteem. He was weak enough now to let even Ariel find her way to his vanity! I saw it, with a sense of misgiving, with a doubt whether I had not delayed my visit until too late, which turned me cold, from head to foot.

Miserrimus Dexter spoke—to Ariel, not to me.

"Poor devil!" he said, patting her head complacently. "You don't understand a word of my stories, do you? And yet I can make the flesh creep on your great clumsy body—and yet I can hold your muddled mind, and make you like it? Poor devil!" He leaned back serenely in his chair, and looked my way again. Would the sight of me remind him of the words that had passed between us, not a minute since? No! There was the pleasantly-trickled self-conceit smiling at me exactly as it had smiled at Ariel. "I excel in dramatic narrative, Mr. Valeria," he said. "And this creature here on the stool, is a remarkable proof of it. She is quite a psychological study, when I tell her one of my stories. It is really amusing to see the