

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 XLV.

THE DUSTHEAP DISTURBED.

Our man had successfully traced the lodge-keeper's daughter and her husband to a small town in one of the Western States. Mr. Playmore's letter of introduction at once secured him a cordial reception for the married pair, and a patient hearing when he stated the object of his voyage across the Atlantic.

His first questions led to no very encouraging results. The woman was confused and surprised, and was apparently quite unable to exert her memory to any useful purpose. Fortunately, her husband proved to be a very intelligent man. He took the agent privately aside and said to him, "I understand my wife and you don't. Tell me exactly what it is you want to know, and leave it to me to discover how much she remembers, and how much she forgets."

This sensible suggestion was readily accepted. The agent waited for events, a day and a night.

Early the next morning, the husband said to him, "Talk to my wife now, and you will find she has something to tell you. Only mind this! Don't laugh at her when she speaks of trifles. She is half ashamed to speak of trifles, even to me. Think men are above such matters, you know. Listen quietly, and let her talk—and you will get at it all in that way."

The agent followed his instructions, and "got at it" as follows:—

The woman remembered, perfectly well, being sent to clean the bedrooms and put them tidy, after the gentlefolks had all left Gleninch. Her mother had a bad hip at the time, and could not go with her and help her. She did much fancy being alone in the great house, after what had happened in it. On her way to her work, she passed two of the cottagers' children in the neighbourhood, at play in the park. Mr. Macallan was always kind to his poor tenants, and never objected to the young ones round about having a run on the grass. The two children idly followed her to the house. She took them inside, along with her; not liking the place, as already mentioned, and feeling that they would be company in the solitary rooms.

She began her work in the Guests' Corridor—leaving the room in the other Corridor, in which the death had happened, to the last.

There was little to do in the two first rooms. There was not litter enough, when she had swept the floors and cleaned the grates, to even half fill the housemaid's bucket which she carried with her. The children followed her about; and, all things considered, were "very good company" in the lonely place.

The third room (that is to say, the bedroom which had been occupied by Miserrimus Dexter) was in a much worse state than the other two, and wanted a great deal of tidying. She did not much notice the children here, being occupied with her work. The litter was swept up from the carpet, and the cinders and ashes were taken out of the grate, and the whole of it was in the bucket, when her attention was recalled to the children by hearing one of them cry.

She looked about the room without at first discovering them.

A fresh outburst of crying led her in the right direction, and showed her the children under a table in a corner of the room. The youngest of the two had got into a waste-paper basket. The eldest had found an old bottle of gum, with a brush fixed in the cork, and was gravely painting the face of the smaller child with what little remained of the contents of the bottle. Some natural struggles, on the part of the little creature, had ended in the overthrow of the basket, and the usual outburst of crying had followed as a matter of course.

In this state of things the remedy was soon applied. The woman took the bottle away from the eldest child, and gave it a "box on the ear." The younger one she set on its legs again and she put the two "in the corner" to keep them quiet. This done, she swept up such fragments of the torn paper in the basket as had fallen on the floor; threw them back again into the basket, along with the gum-bottle; fetched the bucket, and emptied the basket into it; and then proceeded to the fourth and last room in the corridor, where she finished her work for that day.

Leaving the house, with the children after her, she took the filled bucket to the dust heap, and emptied it in a hollow place among the rubbish, about halfway up the mound. Then she took the children home; and there was an end of it, for the day.

Such was the result of the appeal made to the woman's memory of domestic events at Gleninch.

The conclusion at which Mr. Playmore arrived, from the facts submitted to him, was, that the chances were now decidedly in favour of the recovery of the letter. Thrown in, nearly midway between the contents of the housemaid's bucket, the torn morsels would be protected above as well as below, when they were emptied on the dust heap.

Succeeding weeks and months would add to that protection, by adding to the accumulated

refuse. In the neglected condition of the grounds, the dust heap had not been disturbed in search of manure. There it had stood, untouched, from the time when the family left Gleninch, to the present day. And there, hidden deep somewhere in the mound, the fragments of the letter must be!

Such were the lawyer's conclusions. He had written immediately to communicate them to Benjamin. And, thereupon, what had Benjamin done?

After having tried his powers of reconstruction on his own correspondence, the prospect of experimenting on the mysterious letter itself, had proved to be a temptation too powerful for the old man to resist. "I almost fancy, my dear, this business of your's has bewitched me," he wrote. "You see I have the misfortune to be an idle man. I have time to spare and money to spare. And the end of it is, that I am here at Gleninch, engaged on my own sole responsibility (with good Mr. Playmore's permission), in searching the dust-heap!"

Benjamin's description of his first view of the field of action at Gleninch followed these characteristic lines of apology.

I passed over the description, without ceremony. My remembrance of the scene was too vivid to require any prompting of that sort. I saw again, in the dim evening light, the unsightly mound which had so strangely attracted my attention at Gleninch. I heard again the words in which Mr. Playmore had explained to me the custom of the dust-heap in Scotch country houses. What had Benjamin and Mr. Playmore done? What had Benjamin and Mr. Playmore found? For me, the true interest of the narrative was there—and to that portion of it I eagerly turned next.

They had proceeded methodically, of course, with one eye on the pounds, shillings, and pence, and the other on the object in view. In Benjamin, the lawyer had found what he had not met with in me—a sympathetic mind, alive to the value of "an abstract of the expenses," and conscious of that most remunerative of human virtues, the virtue of economy.

At so much a week, they had engaged men to dig into the mound and to sift the ashes. At so much a week, they had hired a tent to shelter the open dust-heap from wind and weather. At so much a week, they had engaged the services of a young man (personally known to Benjamin), who was employed in a laboratory under a professor of chemistry, and who had distinguished himself by his skillful manipulation of paper in a recent case of forgery on a well-known London firm. Armed with these preparations, they had begun the work; Benjamin and the young chemist living at Gleninch, and taken it in turns to superintend the proceedings.

Three days of labour with the spade and the sieve produced no results of the slightest importance. However, the matter was in the hands of two quietly-determined men. They declined to be discouraged. They went on.

On the fourth day, the first morsels of paper were found.

Upon examination, they proved to be the fragments of a tradesman's prospectus. Nothing dismayed, Benjamin and the young man still persevered. At the end of the day's work, more pieces of paper were turned up. These proved to be covered with written characters. Mr. Playmore (arriving at Gleninch, as usual, every evening on the conclusion of his labours in the law) was consulted as to the handwriting. After careful examination, he declared that the mutilated portions of sentences submitted to him had been written, beyond all doubt, by Eustace Macallan's first wife!

This discovery roused the enthusiasm of the searchers to fever height.

Spades and sieves were from that moment forbidden utensils. However unpleasant the task might be, hands alone were used in the farther examination of the mound. The first and foremost necessity was to place the morsels of paper (in flat cardboard boxes prepared for the purpose), in their order as they were found. Night came; and the labourers were dismissed; Benjamin and his two colleagues worked on by lamplight. The morsels of paper were now turned up by dozens, instead of by ones and twos. For awhile the search prospered in this way; and then the morsels appeared no more. Had they all been recovered? or would renewed hand-digging yield more yet? The next light layers of rubbish were carefully removed—and the grand discovery of the day followed. There (upside down) was the gum-bottle, which the lodge-keeper's daughter had spoken of! And, more precious still, there, under it, were more fragments of written paper, all stuck together in a little lump, by the last drippings from the gum-bottle dropping upon them as they lay on the dustheap!

The scene now shifted to the interior of the house. When the searchers next assembled, they met at the great table in the library at Gleninch.

Benjamin's experience with the "Puzzles" which he had put together in the days of his boyhood proved to be of some use to his companions. The fragments accidentally stuck together, would, in all probability, be found to fit each other, and would certainly (in any case) be the easiest fragments to reconstruct, as a centre to start from.

The delicate business of separating these pieces of paper, and of preserving them in the order in which they had adhered to each other,

was assigned to the practised fingers of the chemist. But the difficulties of his task did not end here. The writing was, as usual in letters, traced on both sides of the paper, and it could only be preserved for the purpose of reconstruction by splitting each morsel into two—so as artificially to make a blank side, on which could be spread the fine cement used for reuniting the fragments in their original form.

To Mr. Playmore and Benjamin, the prospect of successfully putting the letter together, under these disadvantages, seemed to be almost hopeless. Their skilled colleague soon satisfied them that they were wrong.

He drew their attention to the thickness of the paper—note-paper of the strongest and best quality—on which the writing was traced. It was of more than twice the substance of the last paper on which he had operated, when he was engaged in the forgery case; and it was, on that account, comparatively easy for him, aided by the mechanical appliances which he had brought from London, to split the morsels of the torn paper, within a given space of time which might permit them to begin the reconstruction of the letter that night.

With these explanations, he quietly devoted himself to his work. While Benjamin and the lawyer were still poring over the scattered morsels of the letter which had been first discovered, and trying to piece them together again, the chemist had divided the greater part of the fragments specially confided to him into two halves each; and had correctly put together some five or six sentences of the letter, on the smooth sheet of cardboard prepared for that purpose.

They looked eagerly at the reconstructed writing, so far.

It was correctly done: the sense was perfect. The first result gained by examination was remarkable enough to reward them for all their exertions. The language used plainly identified the person to whom the late Mrs. Eustace had addressed her letter.

That person was—my husband.

And the letter thus addressed—if the plainest circumstantial evidence could be trusted—was identical with the letter which Miserrimus Dexter had suppressed until the Trial was over, and had been destroyed by tearing it up.

These were the discoveries that had been made, at the time when Benjamin wrote to me. He had been on the point of posting his letter, when Mr. Playmore had suggested that he should keep it by him for a few days longer, on the chance of having more still to tell me.

"We are indebted to her for these results," the lawyer had said. "But for her resolution, and her influence over Miserrimus Dexter, we should never have discovered what the dust-heap was hiding from us—we should never have seen so much as a glimmering of the truth. She has the first claim to the full information. Let her have it."

The letter had been accordingly kept back for three days. That interval being at an end, it was hurriedly resumed and concluded in terms which indescribably alarmed me.

"The chemist is advancing rapidly with his part of the work," Benjamin wrote; "and I have succeeded in putting together a separate portion of the torn writing which makes sense. Comparison of what he has accomplished with what I have accomplished has led to startling conclusions. Unless Mr. Playmore and I are entirely wrong, and God grant we may be so! there is a serious necessity for you keeping the reconstruction of the letter strictly secret from everybody about you. The disclosures suggested by what has come to light are so heart-rending and so dreadful, that I cannot bring myself to write about them, until I am absolutely obliged to do so. Please forgive me for disturbing you with this news. We are bound, sooner or later, to consult with you in the matter; and we think it right to prepare your mind for what may be to come."

To this was added a postscript in Mr. Playmore's handwriting.

"Pray observe strictly the caution which Mr. Benjamin impresses on you. And bear this in mind, as a warning from me. If we succeed in reconstructing the entire letter, the last person living who ought, in my opinion, to be allowed to see it, is—your husband."

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE CRISIS DEFERRED.

"Take care, Valeria!" said Mrs. Macallan. "I ask you no questions; I only caution you for your own sake. Eustace has noticed, what I have noticed—Eustace has seen a change in you. Take care!"

So my mother-in-law spoke to me, later in the day, when we happened to be alone. I had done my best to conceal all traces of the effect produced on me by the strange and terrible news from Gleninch. But who could read what I had read, who could feel what I now felt, and still maintain an undisturbed serenity of look and manner? If I had been the vilest hypocrite living, I doubt, even then, if my face could have kept my secret, while my mind was full of Benjamin's letter.

Having spoken her word of caution, Mrs. Macallan made no further advance to me. I dare say she was right. Still, it seemed hard to be left, without a word of advice or of sympathy, to decide for myself what it was my duty to my husband to do next.

To show him Benjamin's narrative, in his state of health, and in the face of the warning addressed to me, was simply out of the question. At the same time, it was equally impossible, after I had already betrayed myself, to keep him entirely in the dark. I thought over it anxiously in the night. When the morning came, I decided to appeal to my husband's confidence in me.

I went straight to the point in these terms: "Eustace, your mother said yesterday that you noticed a change in me, when I came back from my drive. Is she right?"

"Quite right, Valeria," he answered—speaking in lower tones than usual, and not looking at me.

"We have no concealments from each other, now," I answered. "I ought to tell you, and I do tell you, that I found a letter from England waiting at the banker's, which has caused me some agitation and alarm. Will you leave it to me to choose my own time for speaking more plainly? And will you believe, love, that I am really doing my duty towards you, as a good wife, in making this request?"

I paused. He made no answer: I could see that he was secretly struggling with himself. Had I ventured too far? Had I over-estimated the strength of my influence? My heart beat fast, my voice faltered—but I summoned courage enough to take his hand, and to make a last appeal to him. "Eustace!" I said, "don't you know me yet well enough to trust me?"

He turned towards me for the first time. I saw a last vanishing trace of doubt in his eyes as they looked into mine.

"You promise, sooner or later, to tell me the whole truth?" he said.

"I promise with all my heart!"

"I trust you, Valeria!"

His brightening eyes told me that he really meant what he said. We sealed our compact with a kiss. Pardon me for mentioning these trifles—I am still writing (if you will kindly remember it) of our new honeymoon.

By that day's post I answered Benjamin's letter, telling him what I had done, and entreating him, if he and Mr. Playmore approved of my conduct, to keep me informed of any future discoveries which they might make at Gleninch.

After an interval—an endless interval, as it seemed to me—of ten days more, I received a second letter from my old friend; with another postscript added by Mr. Playmore.

"We are advancing steadily and successfully with the putting together of the letters," Benjamin wrote. "The one new discovery which we have made is of serious importance to your husband. We have reconstructed certain sentences, declaring, in the plainest words, that the arsenic which Eustace procured was purchased at the request of his wife, and was in her possession at Gleninch. This, remember, is in the handwriting of the wife, and is signed by the wife—as we have also found out. Unfortunately, I am obliged to add, that the objection to taking your husband into our confidence, mentioned when I last wrote, still remains in force—in greater force, I may say, than ever. The more we make out of the letter, the more inclined we are (if we only studied our own feelings) to throw it back into the dust-heap, in mercy to the memory of the unhappy writer. I shall keep this open for a day or two. If there is more news to tell you by that time, you will hear of it from Mr. Playmore."

Mr. Playmore's postscript followed, dated three days later.

"The concluding part of the late Mrs. Macallan's letter to her husband," the lawyer wrote, "has proved accidentally to be the first part which we have succeeded in piecing together. With the exception of a few gaps still left here and there, the writing of the closing paragraphs has been perfectly reconstructed. I have neither the time nor the inclination to write to you on this sad subject in any detail. In a fortnight more, at the longest, we shall, I hope, send you a copy of the letter, complete from the first line to the last. Meanwhile, it is my duty to tell you that there is one bright side to this otherwise deplorable and shocking document. Legally speaking, as well as morally speaking, it absolutely vindicates your husband's innocence. And it may be lawfully used for this purpose—if he can reconcile it to his conscience, and to the mercy due to the memory of the dead, to permit the public exposure of the letter in Court. Understand me, he cannot be tried again on what we call the criminal charge—for certain technical reasons with which I need not trouble you. But if the facts which were involved at the criminal trial can also be shown to be involved in a civil action (and, in this case, they can), the entire matter may be made the subject of a new legal inquiry; and the verdict of a second jury, completely vindicating your husband, may be thus obtained. Keep this information to yourself for the present. Preserve the position which you have so sensibly adopted towards Eustace, until you have read the restored letter. When you have done this, my own idea is that you will shrink, in pity to *him*, from letting him see it. How he is to be kept in ignorance of what we have discovered is another question, the discussion of which must be deferred until we can consult together. Until that time comes, I can only repeat my advice—Wait till the next news reaches you from Gleninch."

I waited. What I suffered, what Eustace thought of me, does not matter. Nothing matters now but the facts.