

THE LAW AND THE LADY: A NOVEL.

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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 IX.

THE DEFEAT OF THE MAJOR.

The servant returned to us, bringing with him a tiny bottle of champagne, and a plate-full of delicate little sugared biscuits.

"I have had this wine bottled expressly for the ladies," said the Major. "The biscuits come to me direct from Paris. As a favour to me you must take some refreshment. And then—" he stopped, and looked at me very attentively. "And then," he resumed, "shall I go to my young prima-donna upstairs, and leave you here alone?"

It was impossible to hint more delicately, at the one request which I now had in my mind to make to him. I took his hand and pressed it gratefully.

"The tranquillity of my whole life to come, is at stake," I said. "When I am left here by myself, does your generous sympathy permit me to examine everything in the room?"

He signed to me to drink the champagne, and to eat a biscuit, before he gave his answer.

"This is serious," he said. "I wish you to be in perfect possession of yourself. Restore your strength—and then I will speak to you."

I did as he bade me. In a minute from the time when I drank it, the delicious sparkling wine had begun to revive me.

"Is it your express wish," he resumed, "that I should leave you here by yourself, to search the room?"

"It is my express wish," I answered.

"I take a heavy responsibility on myself in granting your request. But I grant it for all that, because I sincerely believe—as you believe—that the tranquillity of your life to come depends on your discovering the truth." Saying those words, he took two keys from his pocket.

"You will naturally feel a suspicion," he went on, "of any locked doors that you may find here. The only locked places in the room are the doors of the cupboard under the long bookcase, and the door of the Italian cabinet in that corner. The small key opens the bookcase cupboard; the long key opens the cabinet door."

With that explanation, he laid the keys before me on the table.

"Thus far," he said, "I have rigidly respected the promise which I made to your husband. I shall continue to be faithful to my promise, whatever may be the result of your examination of the room. I am bound in honour not to assist you, by word or deed. I am not even at liberty to offer you the slightest hint. Is that understood?"

"Certainly!"

"Very good. I have now a last word of warning to give you—and then I have done. If you do by any chance succeed in laying your hand on the clue, remember this—the discovery which follows will be a terrible one. If you have any doubt about your capacity to sustain a shock which will strike you to the soul, for God's sake give up the idea of finding out your husband's secret, at once and for ever!"

"I thank you for your warning, Major. I must face the consequences of making the discovery, whatever they may be."

"You are positively resolved?"

"Positively."

"Very well. Take any time you please. The house, and every person in it, is at your disposal. Ring the bell once, if you want the man-servant. Ring twice if you wish the house-maid to wait on you. From time to time, I shall just look in myself to see how you are going on. I am responsible for your comfort and security, you know, while you honour me by remaining under my roof."

He lifted my hand to his lips, and fixed a last attentive look on me.

"I hope I am not running too great a risk," he said—more to himself than to me. "The women have led me into many a rash action, in my time. Have you led me, I wonder, into the rashest action of all?"

With those ominous last words he bowed gravely, and left me alone in the room.

CHAPTER X.

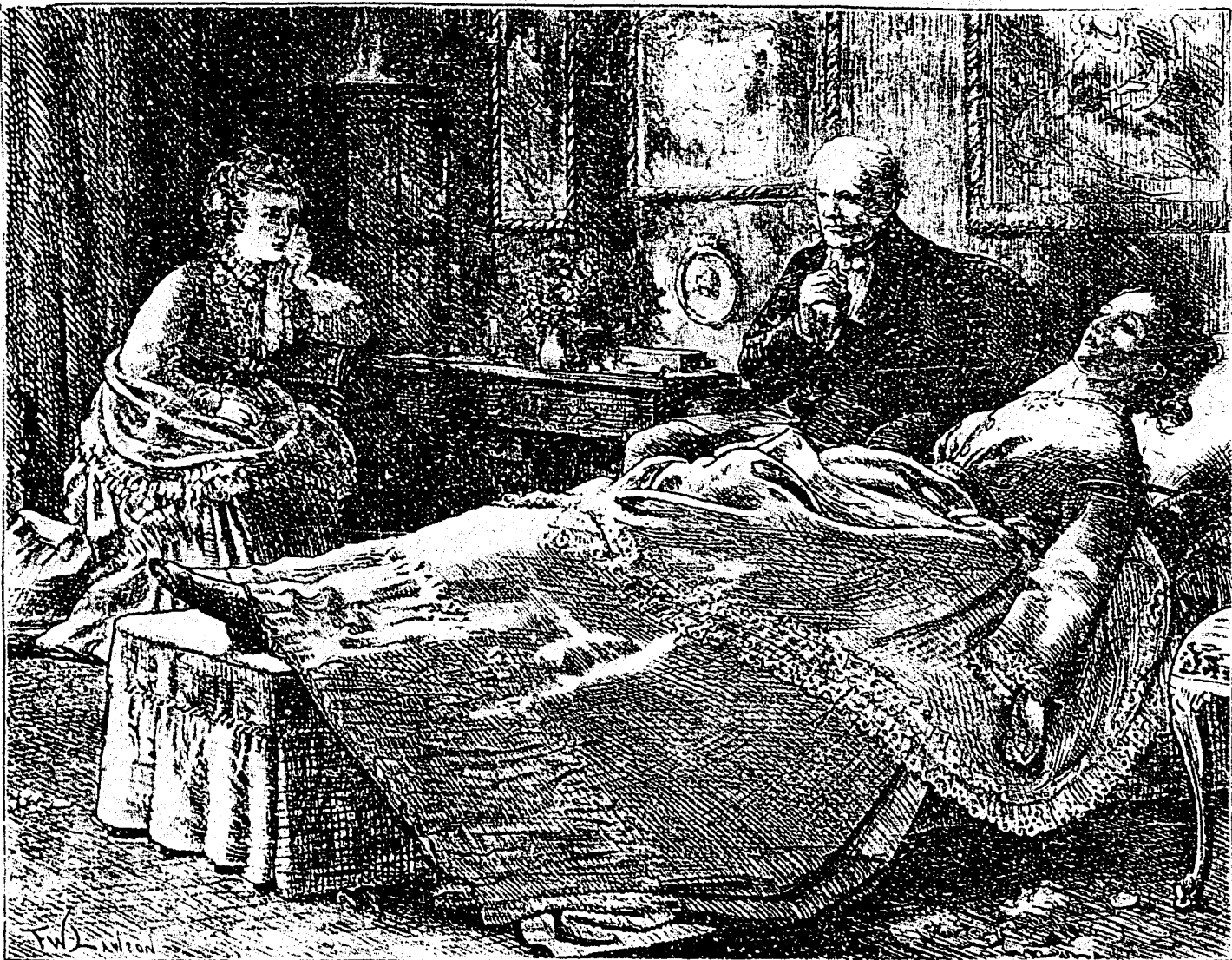
THE SEARCH.

The fire burning in the grate was not a very large one; and the outer air (as I had noticed on my way to the house) had something of a wintry sharpness in it, that day.

Still, my first feeling when Major Fitz-David left me, was a feeling of heat and oppression—with its natural result, a difficulty in breathing freely. The nervous agitation of the time was, I suppose, answerable for these sensations. I took off my bonnet and mantle and gloves, and opened the window for a little while. Nothing was to be seen outside but a paved courtyard (with a skylight in the middle), closed at the farther end by the wall of the Major's stables. A few minutes at the window cooled and refreshed me. I shut it down again, and took my first step on the way to discovery. In other words, I began my first examination of the four walls round me, and of all that they enclosed.



"It's tremendously interesting," she went on. "I've read it twice over—I have. Mind you, I believe he did it, after all."



"I finally opened my eyes and looked round me."

I was amazed at my own calmness. My interview with Major Fitz-David had, perhaps, exhausted my capacity for feeling any strong emotion—for the time at least. It was a relief to me to be alone; it was a relief to me to begin the search. Those were my only sensations, so far.

The shape of the room was oblong. Of the two shorter walls, one contained the door in grooves which I have already mentioned as

communicating with the front room. The other was almost entirely occupied by the broad window which looked out on the courtyard.

Taking the doorway wall first, what was there, in the shape of furniture, on either side of it? There was a card-table on either side. Above each card-table stood a magnificent china bowl, placed on a gilt and carved bracket fixed to the wall.

I opened the card-tables. The drawers be-

neath contained nothing but cards, and the usual counters and markers. With the exception of one pack, the cards in both tables were still wrapped in their paper covers exactly as they had come from the shop. I examined the loose pack, card by card. No writing—no mark of any kind—was visible on any one of them. Assisted by a library ladder which stood against the bookcase, I looked next into the two china bowls. Both were perfectly empty. Was there