

The Law and the Lady

By

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1. The Bride's Mistake

"FOR after this manner in the old time the holy women also who trusted in God adorned themselves, being in subjection unto their own husbands; even as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord; whose daughters ye are as long as ye do well, and are not afraid with any amazement."

Concluding the Marriage Service of the Church of England in those well-known words, my uncle Starkweather shut up his book, and looked at me across the altar rails with a hearty expression of interest on his broad, red face. At the same time my aunt, Mrs. Starkweather, standing by my side, tapped me smartly on the shoulder, and said,

"Valeria, you are married!"

Where were my thoughts? What had become of my attention? I was too bewildered to know. I started and looked at my new husband. He seemed to be almost as much bewildered as I was. The same thought had, as I believe, occurred to us both at the same moment. Was it really possible--in spite of his mother's opposition to our marriage--that we were Man and Wife? My aunt Starkweather settled the question by a second tap on my shoulder.

"Take his arm!" she whispered, in the tone of a woman who had lost all patience with me.

I took his arm.

"Follow your uncle."

Holding fast by my husband's arm, I followed my uncle and the curate who had assisted him at the marriage.

The two clergymen led us into the vestry. The church was in one of the dreary quarters of London, situated between the City and the West End; the day was dull; the atmosphere was heavy and damp. We were a melancholy little wedding party, worthy of the dreary neighborhood and the dull day. No relatives or friends of my husband's were present; his family, as I have already hinted, disapproved of his marriage. Except my uncle and my aunt, no other relations appeared on my side. I had lost both my parents, and I had but few friends. My dear father's faithful old clerk, Benjamin, attended the wedding to "give me away," as the phrase is. He had known me from a child, and, in my forlorn position, he was as good as a father to me.

The last ceremony left to be performed was, as usual, the signing of the marriage register. In the confusion of the moment (and in the absence of any information to guide me) I

committed a mistake--ominous, in my aunt Starkweather's opinion, of evil to come. I signed my married instead of my maiden name.

"What!" cried my uncle, in his loudest and cheeriest tones, "you have forgotten your own name already? Well, well! let us hope you will never repent parting with it so readily. Try again, Valeria--try again."

With trembling fingers I struck the pen through my first effort, and wrote my maiden name, very badly indeed, as follows:

Valeria Brinton

When it came to my husband's turn I noticed, with surprise, that his hand trembled too, and that he produced a very poor specimen of his customary signature:

Eustace Woodville

My aunt, on being requested to sign, complied under protest. "A bad beginning!" she said, pointing to my first unfortunate signature with the feather end of her pen. "I hope, my dear, you may not live to regret it."

Even then, in the days of my ignorance and my innocence, that curious outbreak of my aunt's superstition produced a certain uneasy sensation in my mind. It was a consolation to me to feel the reassuring pressure of my husband's hand. It was an indescribable relief to hear my uncle's hearty voice wishing me a happy life at parting. The good man had left his north-country Vicarage (my home since the death of my parents) expressly to read the service at my marriage; and he and my aunt had arranged to return by the mid-day train. He folded me in his great strong arms, and he gave me a kiss which must certainly have been heard by the idlers waiting for the bride and bridegroom outside the church door.

"I wish you health and happiness, my love, with all my heart. You are old enough to choose for yourself, and--no offense, Mr. Woodville, you and I are new friends--and I pray God, Valeria, it may turn out that you have chosen well. Our house will be dreary enough without you; but I don't complain, my dear. On the contrary, if this change in your life makes you happier, I rejoice. Come, come! don't cry, or you will set your aunt off--and it's no joke at her time of life. Besides, crying will spoil your beauty. Dry your eyes and look in the glass there, and you will see that I am right. Good-by, child--and God bless you!"

He tucked my aunt under his arm, and hurried out. My heart sank a little, dearly as I loved my husband, when I had seen the last of the true friend and protector of my maiden days.

The parting with old Benjamin came next. "I wish you well, my dear; don't forget me," was all he said. But the old days at home came back on me at those few words. Benjamin always dined with us on Sundays in my father's time, and always brought some little

present with him for his master's child. I was very near to "spoiling my beauty" (as my uncle had put it) when I offered the old man my cheek to kiss, and heard him sigh to himself, as if he too were not quite hopeful about my future life.

My husband's voice roused me, and turned my mind to happier thoughts.

"Shall we go, Valeria?" he asked.

I stopped him on our way out to take advantage of my uncle's advice; in other words, to see how I looked in the glass over the vestry fireplace.

What does the glass show me?

The glass shows a tall and slender young woman of three-and-twenty years of age. She is not at all the sort of person who attracts attention in the street, seeing that she fails to exhibit the popular yellow hair and the popular painted cheeks. Her hair is black; dressed, in these later days (as it was dressed years since to please her father), in broad ripples drawn back from the forehead, and gathered into a simple knot behind (like the hair of the Venus de Medicis), so as to show the neck beneath. Her complexion is pale: except in moments of violent agitation there is no color to be seen in her face. Her eyes are of so dark a blue that they are generally mistaken for black. Her eyebrows are well enough in form, but they are too dark and too strongly marked. Her nose just inclines toward the aquiline bend, and is considered a little too large by persons difficult to please in the matter of noses. The mouth, her best feature, is very delicately shaped, and is capable of presenting great varieties of expression. As to the face in general, it is too narrow and too long at the lower part, too broad and too low in the higher regions of the eyes and the head. The whole picture, as reflected in the glass, represents a woman of some elegance, rather too pale, and rather too sedate and serious in her moments of silence and repose--in short, a person who fails to strike the ordinary observer at first sight, but who gains in general estimation on a second, and sometimes on a third view. As for her dress, it studiously conceals, instead of proclaiming, that she has been married that morning. She wears a gray cashmere tunic trimmed with gray silk, and having a skirt of the same material and color beneath it. On her head is a bonnet to match, relieved by a quilling of white muslin with one deep red rose, as a morsel of positive color, to complete the effect of the whole dress.

Have I succeeded or failed in describing the picture of myself which I see in the glass? It is not for me to say. I have done my best to keep clear of the two vanities--the vanity of depreciating and the vanity of praising my own personal appearance. For the rest, well written or badly written, thank Heaven it is done!

And whom do I see in the glass standing by my side?

I see a man who is not quite so tall as I am, and who has the misfortune of looking older than his years. His forehead is prematurely bald. His big chestnut-colored beard and his long overhanging mustache are prematurely streaked with gray. He has the color in the face which my face wants, and the firmness in his figure which my figure wants. He looks at me with the tenderest and gentlest eyes (of a light brown) that I ever saw in the countenance of a man. His smile is rare and sweet; his manner, perfectly quiet and retiring, has yet a latent persuasiveness in it which is (to women) irresistibly winning. He just halts a little in his walk, from the effect of an injury received in past years, when he was a soldier serving in India, and he carries a thick bamboo cane, with a curious crutch handle (an old favorite), to help himself along whenever he gets on his feet, in doors or out. With this one little drawback (if it is a drawback), there is nothing infirm or old or awkward about him; his slight limp when he walks has (perhaps to my partial eyes) a certain quaint grace of its own, which is pleasanter to see than the unrestrained activity of other men. And last and best of all, I love him! I love him! I love him! And there is an end of my portrait of my husband on our wedding-day.

The glass has told me all I want to know. We leave the vestry at last.

The sky, cloudy since the morning, has darkened while we have been in the church, and the rain is beginning to fall heavily. The idlers outside stare at us grimly under their umbrellas as we pass through their ranks and hasten into our carriage. No cheering; no sunshine; no flowers strewn in our path; no grand breakfast; no genial speeches; no bridesmaids; no fathers or mother's blessing. A dreary wedding--there is no denying it--and (if Aunt Starkweather is right) a bad beginning as well!

A coup has been reserved for us at the railway station. The attentive porter, on the lookout for his fee pulls down the blinds over the side windows of the carriage, and shuts out all prying eyes in that way. After what seems to be an interminable delay the train starts. My husband winds his arm round me. "At last!" he whispers, with love in his eyes that no words can utter, and presses me to him gently. My arm steals round his neck; my eyes answer his eyes. Our lips meet in the first long, lingering kiss of our married life.

Oh, what recollections of that journey rise in me as I write! Let me dry my eyes, and shut up my paper for the day.

2. The Bride's Thoughts

WE had been traveling for a little more than an hour when a change passed insensibly over us both.

Still sitting close together, with my hand in his, with my head on his shoulder, little by little we fell insensibly into silence. Had we already exhausted the narrow yet eloquent vocabulary of love? Or had we determined by unexpressed consent, after enjoying the luxury of passion that speaks, to try the deeper and finer rapture of passion that thinks? I can hardly determine; I only know that a time came when, under some strange influence, our lips were closed toward each other. We traveled along, each of us absorbed in our own reverie. Was he thinking exclusively of me--as I was thinking exclusively of him? Before the journey's end I had my doubts; at a little later time I knew for certain that his thoughts, wandering far away from his young wife, were all turned inward on his own unhappy self.

For me the secret pleasure of filling my mind with him, while I felt him by my side, was a luxury in itself.

I pictured in my thoughts our first meeting in the neighborhood of my uncle's house.

Our famous north-country trout stream wound its flashing and foaming way through a ravine in the rocky moorland. It was a windy, shadowy evening. A heavily clouded sunset lay low and red in the west. A solitary angler stood casting his fly at a turn in the stream where the backwater lay still and deep under an overhanging bank. A girl (myself) standing on the bank, invisible to the fisherman beneath, waited eagerly to see the trout rise.

The moment came; the fish took the fly.

Sometimes on the little level strip of sand at the foot of the bank, sometimes (when the stream turned again) in the shallower water rushing over its rocky bed, the angler followed the captured trout, now letting the line run out and now winding it in again, in the difficult and delicate process of "playing" the fish. Along the bank I followed to watch the contest of skill and cunning between the man and the trout. I had lived long enough with my uncle Starkweather to catch some of his enthusiasm for field sports, and to learn something, especially, of the angler's art. Still following the stranger, with my eyes intently fixed on every movement of his rod and line, and with not so much as a chance fragment of my attention to spare for the rough path along which I was walking, I stepped by chance on the loose overhanging earth at the edge of the bank, and fell into the stream in an instant.

The distance was trifling, the water was shallow, the bed of the river was (fortunately for me) of sand. Beyond the fright and the wetting I had nothing to complain of. In a few moments I was out of the water and up again, very much ashamed of myself, on the firm

ground. Short as the interval was, it proved long enough to favor the escape of the fish. The angler had heard my first instinctive cry of alarm, had turned, and had thrown aside his rod to help me. We confronted each other for the first time, I on the bank and he in the shallow water below. Our eyes encountered, and I verily believe our hearts encountered at the same moment. This I know for certain, we forgot our breeding as lady and gentleman: we looked at each other in barbarous silence.

I was the first to recover myself. What did I say to him?

I said something about my not being hurt, and then something more, urging him to run back and try if he might not yet recover the fish.

He went back unwillingly. He returned to me--of course without the fish. Knowing how bitterly disappointed my uncle would have been in his place, I apologized very earnestly. In my eagerness to make atonement, I even offered to show him a spot where he might try again, lower down the stream.

He would not hear of it; he entreated me to go home and change my wet dress. I cared nothing for the wetting, but I obeyed him without knowing why.

He walked with me. My way back to the Vicarage was his way back to the inn. He had come to our parts, he told me, for the quiet and retirement as much as for the fishing. He had noticed me once or twice from the window of his room at the inn. He asked if I were not the vicar's daughter.

I set him right. I told him that the vicar had married my mother's sister, and that the two had been father and mother to me since the death of my parents. He asked if he might venture to call on Doctor Starkweather the next day, mentioning the name of a friend of his, with whom he believed the vicar to be acquainted. I invited him to visit us, as if it had been my house; I was spell-bound under his eyes and under his voice. I had fancied, honestly fancied, myself to have been in love often and often before this time. Never in any other man's company had I felt as I now felt in the presence of this man. Night seemed to fall suddenly over the evening landscape when he left me. I leaned against the Vicarage gate. I could not breathe, I could not think; my heart fluttered as if it would fly out of my bosom--and all this for a stranger! I burned with shame; but oh, in spite of it all, I was so happy!

And now, when little more than a few weeks had passed since that first meeting, I had him by my side; he was mine for life! I lifted my head from his bosom to look at him. I was like a child with a new toy--I wanted to make sure that he was really my own.

He never noticed the action; he never moved in his corner of the carriage. Was he deep in his own thoughts? and were they thoughts of Me?

I laid down my head again softly, so as not to disturb him. My thoughts wandered backward once more, and showed me another picture in the golden gallery of the past.

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