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## [The Law and the Lady](#)

[Wilkie Collins](#)

### Chapter 23 - My Mother-In-Law Surprises Me

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I TOOK a chair at a respectful distance from the sofa on which Mrs. Macallan seated herself. The old lady smiled, and beckoned to me to take my place by her side. Judging by appearances, she had certainly not come to see me in the character of an enemy. It remained to be discovered whether she were really disposed to be my friend.

"I have received a letter from your uncle the vicar," she began. "He asks me to visit you, and I am happy--for reasons which you shall presently hear--to comply with his request. Under other circumstances I doubt very much, my dear child--strange as the confession may appear--whether I should have ventured into your presence. My son has behaved to you so weakly, and (in my opinion) so inexcusably, that I am really, speaking as his mother, almost ashamed to face you."

Was she in earnest? I listened to her and looked at her in amazement.

"Your uncle's letter," pursued Mrs. Macallan, "tells me how you have behaved under your hard trial, and what you propose to do now Eustace has left you. Doctor Starkweather, poor man, seems to be inexpressibly shocked by what you said to him when he was in London. He begs me to use my influence to induce you to abandon your present ideas, and to make you return to your old home at the Vicarage. I don't in the least agree with your uncle, my dear. Wild as I believe your plans to be--you have not the slightest chance of succeeding in carrying them out--I admire your courage, your fidelity, your unshaken faith in my unhappy son, after his unpardonable behavior to you. You are a fine creature, Valeria, and I have come here to tell you so in plain words. Give me a kiss, child. You deserve to be the wife of a hero, and you have married one of the weakest of living mortals. God forgive me for speaking so of my own son; but it's in my mind, and it must come out!"

This way of speaking of Eustace was more than I could suffer, even from his mother. I recovered the use of my tongue in my husband's defense.

"I am sincerely proud of your good opinion, dear Mrs. Macallan," I said. "But you distress me--forgive me if I own it plainly--when I hear you speak so disparagingly of Eustace. I cannot agree with you that my husband is the weakest of living mortals."

"Of course not!" retorted the old lady. "You are like all good women--you make a hero of the man you love,--whether he deserve it or not. Your husband has hosts of good qualities, child--and perhaps I know them better than you do. But his whole conduct, from the moment when he first entered your uncle's house to the present time, has been, I say again, the conduct of an essentially weak man. What do you think he has done now by way of climax? He has joined a charitable brotherhood; and he is off to the war in Spain with a red cross on his arm, when he ought to be here on his knees, asking his wife to forgive him. I say that is the conduct of a weak man. Some people might call it by a harder name."

This news startled and distressed me. I might be resigned to his leaving me for a time; but all my instincts as a woman revolted at his placing himself in a position of danger during his separation from his wife. He had now deliberately added to my anxieties. I thought it cruel of him--but I would not confess what I thought to his mother. I affected to be as cool as she was; and I disputed her conclusions with all the firmness that I could summon to help me. The terrible old woman only went on abusing him more vehemently than ever.

"What I complain of in my son," proceeded Mrs. Macallan, "is that he has entirely failed to understand you. If he had married a fool, his conduct would be intelligible enough. He would have done wisely to conceal from a fool that he had been married already, and that he had suffered the horrid public exposure of a Trial for the murder of his wife. Then, again, he would have been quite right, when this same fool had discovered the truth, to take himself out of her way before she could suspect him of poisoning her--for the sake of the peace and quiet of both parties. But you are not a fool. I can see that, after only a short experience of you. Why can't he see it too? Why didn't he trust you with his secret from the first, instead of stealing his way into your affections under an assumed name? Why did he plan (as he confessed to me) to take you away to the Mediterranean, and to keep you abroad, for fear of some officious friends at home betraying him to you as the prisoner of the famous Trial? What is the plain answer to all these questions? What is the one possible explanation of this otherwise unaccountable conduct? There is only one answer, and one explanation. My poor, wretched son--he takes after his father; he isn't the least like me!--is weak: weak in his way of judging, weak in his way of acting, and, like all weak people, headstrong and unreasonable to the last degree. There is the truth! Don't get red and angry. I am as fond of him as you are. I can see his merits too. And one of them is that he has married a woman of spirit and resolution--so faithful and so fond of him that she won't even let his own mother tell her of his faults. Good child! I like you for hating me!"

"Dear madam, don't say that I hate you!" I exclaimed (feeling very much as if I did hate her, though, for all that). "I only presume to think that you are confusing a delicate-minded man with a weak-minded man. Our dear unhappy Eustace--"

"Is a delicate-minded man," said the impenetrable Mrs. Macallan, finishing my sentence for me. "We will leave it there, my dear, and get on to another subject. I wonder whether we shall disagree about that too?"

"What is the subject, madam?"

"I won't tell you if you call me madam. Call me mother. Say, 'What is the subject, mother?'"

"What is the subject, mother?"

"Your notion of turning yourself into a Court of Appeal for a new Trial of Eustace, and forcing the world to pronounce a just verdict on him. Do you really mean to try it?"

"I do!"

Mrs. Macallan considered for a moment grimly with herself.

"You know how heartily I admire your courage, and your devotion to my unfortunate son," she said. "You know by this time that \_I\_ don't cant. But I cannot see you attempt to perform impossibilities; I cannot let you uselessly risk your reputation and your happiness without warning you before it is too late. My child, the thing you have got it in your head to do is not to be done by you or by anybody. Give it up."

"I am deeply obliged to you, Mrs. Macallan--"

"Mother!"

"I am deeply obliged to you, mother, for the interest that you take in me, but I cannot give it up. Right or wrong, risk or no risk, I must and I will try it!"

Mrs. Macallan looked at me very attentively, and sighed to herself.

"Oh, youth, youth!" she said to herself, sadly. "What a grand thing it is to be young!" She controlled the rising regret, and turned on me suddenly, almost fiercely, with these words: "What, in God's name, do you mean to do?"

At the instant when she put the question, the idea crossed my mind that Mrs. Macallan could introduce me, if she pleased, to Miserrimus Dexter. She must know him, and know him well, as a guest at Gleninch and an old friend of her son.

"I mean to consult Miserrimus Dexter," I answered, boldly.

Mrs. Macallan started back from me with a loud exclamation of surprise.

"Are you out of your senses?" she asked.

I told her, as I had told Major Fitz-David, that I had reason to think Mr. Dexter's advice might be of real assistance to me at starting.

"And I," rejoined Mrs. Macallan, "have reason to think that your whole project is a mad one, and that in asking Dexter's advice on it you appropriately consult a madman. You needn't start, child! There is no harm in the creature. I don't mean that he will attack you, or be rude to you. I only say that the last person whom a young woman, placed in your painful and delicate position, ought to associate herself with is Miserrimus Dexter."

Strange! Here was the Major's warning repeated by Mrs. Macallan, almost in the Major's own words. Well! It shared the fate of most warnings. It only made me more and more eager to have my own way.

"You surprise me very much," I said. "Mr. Dexter's evidence, given at the Trial, seems as clear and reasonable as evidence can be."

"Of course it is!" answered Mrs. Macallan. "The shorthand writers and reporters put his evidence into presentable language before they printed it. If you had heard what he really said, as I did, you would have been either very much disgusted with him or very much amused by him, according to your way of looking at things. He began, fairly enough, with a modest explanation of his absurd Christian name, which at once checked the merriment of the audience. But as he went on the mad side of him showed itself. He mixed up sense and nonsense in the strangest confusion; he was called to order over and over again; he was even threatened with fine and imprisonment for contempt of Court. In short, he was just like himself--a mixture of the strangest and the most opposite qualities; at one time perfectly clear and reasonable, as you said just now; at another breaking out into rhapsodies of the most outrageous kind, like a man in a state of delirium. A more entirely unfit person to advise anybody, I tell you again, never lived. You don't expect me to introduce you to him, I hope?"

"I did think of such a thing," I answered. "But after what you have said, dear Mrs. Macallan, I give up the idea, of course. It is not a great sacrifice--it only obliges me to wait a week for Major Fitz-David's dinner-party. He has promised to ask Miserrimus Dexter to meet me."

"There is the Major all over!" cried the old lady. "If you pin your faith on that man, I pity you. He is as slippery as an eel. I suppose you asked him to introduce you to Dexter?"

"Yes."

"Exactly! Dexter despises him, my dear. He knows as well as I do that Dexter won't go to his dinner. And he takes that roundabout way of keeping you apart, instead of saying No to you plainly, like an honest man."

This was bad news. But I was, as usual, too obstinate to own myself defeated.

"If the worst comes to the worst," I said, "I can but write to Mr. Dexter, and beg him to grant me an interview."

"And go to him by yourself, if he does grant it?" inquired Mrs. Macallan.

"Certainly. By myself."

"You really mean it?"

"I do, indeed."

"I won't allow you to go by yourself."

"May I venture to ask, ma'am how you propose to prevent me?"

"By going with you, to be sure, you obstinate hussy! Yes, yes--I can be as headstrong as you are when I like. Mind! I don't want to know what your plans are. I don't want to be mixed up with your plans. My son is resigned to the Scotch Verdict. I am resigned to the Scotch Verdict. It is you who won't let matters rest as they are. You are a vain and foolhardy young person. But, somehow, I have taken a liking to you, and I won't let you go to Miserrimus Dexter by yourself. Put on your bonnet!"

"Now?" I asked.

"Certainly! My carriage is at the door. And the sooner it's over the better I shall be pleased. Get ready--and be quick about it!"

I required no second bidding. In ten minutes more we were on our way to Miserrimus Dexter.

Such was the result of my mother-in-law's visit!

