

Literature, &c.

From Lady Blessington's new work of
'The Lottery of Life.'

MARY LESTER.

A TALE OF ERROR.

It was a lovely evening in the early part of August, when a brilliant sun was sinking in the horizon, and tinging all round with his golden beams, that a travelling carriage and four was seen rapidly descending a bill on the north road. In the carriage, supported by pillows, reclined a young man, on whose high brow and noble countenance disease had stamped its seal in fearful characters, though the natural beauty of the sufferer still shone forth triumphantly over the ravages of ill health. His languid head rested on the shoulder of a young and beautiful girl, and his upturned eyes were fixed, with an expression of unutterable love, on hers. The last rosy rays of sunset, falling on the pale brow of the young man, showed like a red cloud passing over snow, and contrasted sadly with its marble hue.

'Mary, my blessed love,' said the invalid, 'pull the check string, and order Sainville to urge the postillions to advance still quicker.'

'Be composed, dearest Henry,' replied the young lady 'observe you not that the velocity with which we advance has increased the difficulty of your breathing? You will destroy yourself by this exertion.'

'Mary, you know not how essential it is to my peace of mind that we should reach Gretna Green most rapidly; every moment is precious, and the anxiety that preys on me is even still more fatal to my frame than the velocity of our pace. Tell, Sainville then, dearest, to urge the postillions.'

Mary pulled the check-string, and Sainville soon stopped the carriage, and stood by the step. The change that the last hour had produced on the countenance of his master struck the servant with dismay; and he almost feared he should see him expire, as, gasping for breath, he turned his eager eyes on those of Sainville, and laying his hand on the arm of the alarmed servant, said, 'Remember, Sainville, that my life—nay, more than life depends on my reaching Gretna Green in a few hours. Give the postillions gold—promise them all, everything, if they will advance with all possible speed.'

The postillion urged their steeds, and the carriage whirled along with fearful rapidity, while the invalid pressed with a nervous grasp the small trembling hand that rested within his.

Who were this young and interesting pair, at whose dreams of love and happiness the gaunt fiend Death smiled in mockery while he held his dart suspended over them? To tell you who they were, it is necessary to resort to the village of Dawlish, in Devon-shire, where dwelt Mrs. Lester, the widow of a field officer, who was killed at the battle of Waterloo; and who left his still young and beautiful wife, with an infant daughter, a scanty provision, and little else, save the distinguished reputation that his well known bravery had gained in a life devoted to the service of his country, and sealed by his blood.

Colonel Lester's had been a love marriage; but, unlike the generality of such unions, the love had increased with the years that had united them; and they felt so happy as nearly to forget that their marriage had deprived them of the affection and countenance of their mutual relatives, who had declined all intercourse with two poor and wifal persons, as they considered them, who were determined to marry from pure affection, contrary to the advice of all their friends. It was not until death had snatched her husband from her, that Mrs. Lester felt the consequences of her imprudent marriage. Left alone and unprotected, with an infant daughter, how did she wish to claim for her child that protection from her family for which she was too proud to sue for herself. And it was not without many struggles with her pride that she had appealed to their sympathy. This appeal had been unanswered, for the relatives to whom it had been addressed found it still more prudent to decline an intercourse with an ill provided widow, than it had formerly been to renew one with the wife of a meritorious officer, likely to arrive at distinction in his profession.

Mrs. Lester retired from the busy world, and fixed her residence in a small neat cottage at Dawlish, determined to devote her whole time to the education of her child. This spot had been endeared to her by her having spent some of the happiest days of her

life there, with Colonel Lester soon after their marriage; and she found a melancholy pleasure in tracing their former haunts in its neighborhood, when, leaning on his arm, and supported by his affection, the future offered only bright prospects. All the love she had felt for her husband was now centred in his child; and the youthful Mary grew, beneath a mother's tender and fostering care, all that the fondest parent could desire—lovely in person, and pure in mind.

She had only reached her sixteenth year, when, in the summer of 1827, the young Lord Mordaunt came to Dawlish, to try the benefit of change of air in a complaint which threatened to terminate in consumption. The cottage next to Mrs. Lester's was taken for the invalid; and his physician having occasion to refer to that lady for the character of a female servant, an acquaintance was formed which led to an introduction to his patient, who found the society of the mother and daughter so much to his taste, that no day passed that did not find him a visitor at Woodbine cottage. He would spend whole hours at the drawing or work table of Mary, correcting her sketches, reading aloud to her, or giving descriptions of the different foreign countries he had visited.

Lord Mordaunt was a young man so attractive in person and manners, that it would have been difficult for a much more fastidious judge than Mary Lester not to have been captivated by his attentions; and his delicate health served still more to excite a strong interest for him, while it banished all thoughts of alarm, even from the breast of the prudent mother, who looked on him with sorrow, as one foredoomed to an early grave. It is perhaps one of the most amiable proofs of the tenderness of women's hearts—their sympathy and affection, which health and gaiety might fail to produce. The power was exemplified in the conduct of Mary Lester: for when, in their daily walks, in which Lord Mordaunt now attended them, his pale cheek assumed a hectic hue, from the exertion, and his eyes beamed with more than their usual lustre, those of Mary would fill with tears as she marked the first precursors of decay. With trembling anxiety she would urge him to repose himself on some rustic bench; and when he yielded to her entreaties, would hang over him with feelings, of whose source and extent her innocence kept her in ignorance, or led her to attribute solely to pity.

Days passed away, each one increasing the attachment of the young people, and confirming the fears of Lord Mordaunt's physician, while he alone appeared unconscious of his danger. His passion seemed to bind him by new ties to life; and when pain and lassitude reminded him that he was ill, he looked on the blooming cheek and beaming eye of Mary, and asked himself—if one, who felt for her the love that quickened the pulsations of his throbbing heart, could be indeed approaching the cold and cheerless grave? and he clung with renewed hope to existence, now that it had become so valuable.

At this period a sprained ankle confined Mrs. Lester to the house; and she confined Mary every day to the care of Dr. Erskine and his patient, to pursue their accustomed walk. The doctor was skilled in botany and geology; and the neighborhood of Dawlish presented many specimens in both sciences capable of arresting his attention; hence the lovers were frequently left alone in their rambles while he collected treasures for his *hortus siccus*, or cabinet; and the conversation, which under the eye of the dignified matron, or grave doctor, had always been confined to general topics, now became purely personal. When young people begin to talk of themselves, sentiment soon colors the conversations and, from sentimental conversation to love, how quick is the transition! When Lord Mordaunt first avowed his passion, the pure and heartless Mary's innocent reply was, 'O! how happy dear mamma will be!' But a cloud that passed over the brow of her lover, showed that he anticipated not the same effect on Mrs. Lester.

'Do not, dearest, if you value my peace,' said he, 'inform your mother of our attachment. My family would oppose it so strongly, that she would think herself obliged to refuse her sanction—nay, she would, I am sure, think it her duty to prohibit our meeting. A separation from you I could not support; and but one mode seems to avert it. Fly with me, my beloved Mary, to Scotland; our marriage once accomplished, my family must be reconciled to it—at least, they cannot divide us; and

your mother will be saved the blame of having aided it.'

Day after day, the same reasoning was tried by the impassioned lover, and listened to with less reluctance by the too confiding girl; and as she heard the tender reproaches he uttered, and his reiterated avowals of his increasing illness caused as he asserted, by the anxiety that preyed on his mind at her hesitating to elope with him, and marked the growing delicacy of his appearance, her scruples and fears vanished, and, in an evil hour, she left the happy home of her childhood, and the unsuspecting mother who idolized her. A thousand pangs shot through the heart of this innocent and hitherto dutiful daughter, as she prepared to leave the peaceful roof that had sheltered her infancy. She paused at the chamber door of her sleeping parent, and called down blessings on her head, and was only sustained in her resolution to accompany her lover, by the recollection she was to confer happiness—nay, life, on him, and that a few days would see her return to her mother, the happy wife of Lord Mordaunt.

It is the happiness they believe they are to confer, and not that which they hope to receive, that influences the conduct of women: and many a one has fallen a victim to generous affection, who could have resisted the pleadings of selfishness. At the moment of leaving her home, Mary thought only of others, her lover and her mother occupied all her thoughts, and never perhaps, did she more truly love that mother, than when unconsciously planting a dagger in her heart, by the step she was about to take. Never let the young and unsuspecting do evil, in order that good may ensue.—Mary knew that she was about to do wrong; but she was persuaded by her lover that it was the only possible means of securing their future happiness; and she yielded to the temptation.

The valet of Lord Mordaunt, who was in the confidence of his master, made all the necessary arrangements for the elopement; and the lovers left the village of Dawlish while the unsuspecting mother and Dr. Erskine soundly slept, unthinking of the rash step the persons so dear to them were taking.

They had only pursued their route one day, when the rupture of a blood vessel in the chest wrought so fearful a change in Lord Mordaunt, that he became sensible of his danger, and trembled at the idea of dying before he could bequeath his name to his adored Mary. His whole soul was now bent on fulfilling this duty; but, alas! the very anxiety that preyed on him only rendered its accomplishment more difficult. Still he proceeded, resisting all Mary's entreaties to stop to repose himself, and was within a few stages of his destination. No post horses were to be had, and the agonies of disappointed hope were now added to the mortal pangs that shot through the frame of the dying man.—He was removed from his carriage and laid on a couch, while the agonized girl bent over him in speechless woe.

'Remember, Sainville,' murmured Mordaunt, in broken accents, 'that this lady would have been my wife, had I been spared to reach Gretna. Tell my father and mother that it was I who urged—who forced her to this flight, and to look on her as their daughter.'

Here agitation overpowered his feeble frame, and he sunk fainting on his pillow, from whence he never moved again, as death in a few hours closed his mortal sufferings. The hapless Mary stayed by him while a spark of life yet lingered; but when he hand that grasped hers relaxed its hold, she fell into a swoon nearly as cold and rigid as the corpse beside her. For many days a violent fever rendered her insensible to the miseries of her situation. During her delirium she repeatedly called on her mother and lover to save her from some imagined enemy who was forcing her from them and the mistress of the inn, and the chambermaids who assisted her, were melted into tears by the pathos of her incoherent complaints.

Intelligence of the death of Lord Mordaunt had been despatched to Mordaunt castle, the seat of his father, and in due time, the confidential agent of his lordship, accompanied by a London undertaker, arrived to perform the funeral obsequies.

Youth and a good constitution had enabled Mary to triumph over her malady; and, though reduced to extreme languor, reason once more resumed its empire over her brain; but, with returning consciousness came the fearful heart burning recollection of the death scene she had witnessed, and she shrank, with morbid distaste, from a life that now no longer offered her a single charm.

Her entreaties won from the humane mistress an avowal that the mortal remains of him she had loved were to be removed the following day, and she insisted upon looking at them once again. It was evening when, pale and attenuated, presenting only the shadow of her former self, Mary Lester, supported by the pitying females who had watched over her illness, entered the chamber of death. Her eyes fell on the marble brow and finely chiselled features of Lord Mordaunt, beautiful even in death, and an involuntary shudder betrayed her feelings. She motioned to be left alone, and there was an earnestness in the looks and gestures that pleaded for this last indulgence, that rendered compliance with it irresistible. She looked at the face so beloved, every lineament of which was graven in ineffaceable characters on her heart—that face which never before before met her glance without repaying it with one of unutterable tenderness. While she yet gazed in mute despair, and tears, nature's kind relief, were denied to her burning eyes, the last rays of the sun, setting in brilliant splendour, fell on the calm countenance of her lover, tinging its marble paleness with faint red.

'It was thus, Henry, you looked when I last saw the sun's dying beams fall on your beautiful brow,' ejaculated the heart broken girl; 'ah! no! for then those lovely eyes, now for ever veiled in death, sought mine with looks of deep, deep love, and silenced the reproaches of the monitor within my breast. But now, O God of mercy! who shall silence it, or who shall speak comfort to me? Look at me once again. Henry, adored Henry! let me once more hear the blessed sound of that voice! and she paused, as if awaiting the result of her passionate invocation. Then, turning away, 'Fool! senseless fool that I am!' she exclaimed, 'he heeds me not! he has fled for ever! and I am alone—alone, for evermore—in a world that can never again hold forth a single illusion to me. O mother dear, dear mother! and was it for this I deserted you? I thought to return to you a proud and happy bride, and that he would plead, successfully plead, for your pardon for my first fault. But there he lies, who should have pleaded, cold, and speechless, and I live to see him so lie. Henry! beloved Henry! thy lips have never pressed mine; pure, respectful love restrained each ardent impulse, and in thy devoted attachment I found my best shield. But now, now, when thine can no longer return the pressure, O! let me thus imprint the first seal of love! and she pressed her pale and trembling lips to the cold and rigid ones of Mordaunt, and fainted in the action.

It was long ere the kind exertions of the women, who rushed in from the adjoining room on hearing her fall, could restore animation to the exhausted frame of Mary; and when they succeeded, the first sentences that struck on her ears were the following dialogue between Mr. Sable, the undertaker, and Sainville:

'Je vous dit, dat is I tell you, Monsieur Sable, dat eet demoiselle, dis young lady, vas to be de lady, c'est à dire, Pépouse—de wife of my lord. He cannot tell you so himself, parce qu'il est mort, for he be dead; but I do tell to you wat he did tell to me with his last words.'

'Why, you see, Mr. Sainville,' replied the obtuse Sable, 'I cannot outstep my orders: and the affair has a very awkward appearance, to say the least of it. A portionless young lady, as I understood her to be, eloping with a rich young nobleman of splendid expectations, and in the last stage of consumption—why, look you, it has a very suspicious aspect. The marquis is a very stern and severe nobleman; and the marchioness is as proud as Lucifer; neither would for a moment countenance a young person who had no legitimate claims on their consideration, and whom they would naturally look on as an artful adventuress, who had taken advantage of the weakness and partiality of their son to entrap him into an engagement which, luckily, he did not live to complete. Mr. Scruple, the lawyer, explained all this to me; and therefore, neither he nor I can interfere in making any arrangements for the return of the young person to her friends; and as to her accompanying the funeral procession to Mordaunt Castle, it is out of the question.'

'And dis you call religion and humanity in dis country?' said the angry valet. 'Had my dear young lord lived tree hours longer, cette jeune et charmante demoiselle, dat is, dis young lady and pretty lady, would have been Miladi Mordaunt, and Monsieur Scruple and yourself would have bowed de knees to her with great respect. De marquis and de marchioness must den have treated