



CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

AUTOBIOGRAPHY  
OF A SLANDER

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Edna Lyal

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

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# Autobiography of a Slander

*by*

EDNA LYAL





# Contents

MY FIRST STAGE	1
MY SECOND STAGE	13
MY THIRD STAGE	21
MY FOURTH STAGE	31
MY FIFTH STAGE	37
MY SIXTH STAGE	47
MY SEVENTH STAGE	51
MY TRIUMPHANT FINALE	57



# MY FIRST STAGE

At last the tea came up, and so  
With that our tongues began to go.  
Now in that house you're sure of knowing  
The smallest scrap of news that's going.  
We find it there the wisest way  
To take some care of what we say.

RECREATION. JANE TAYLOR.

I was born on the 2nd September, 1886, in a small, dull, country town. When I say the town was dull, I mean, of course, that the inhabitants were unenterprising, for in itself Muddleton was a picturesque place, and though it laboured under the usual disadvantage of a dearth of bachelors and a superfluity of spinsters, it might have been pleasant enough had it not been a favourite resort for my kith and kin.

My father has long enjoyed a world-wide notoriety; he is not, however, as a rule named in good society, though he habitually frequents it; and as I am led to believe that my autobiography will possibly be circulated by Mr. Mudie, and will lie about on drawing-room tables, I will merely mention that a most representation

of my progenitor, under his *nom de théâtre*, Mephistopheles, may be seen now in London, and I should recommend all who wish to understand his character to go to the Lyceum, though, between ourselves, he strongly disapproves of the whole performance.

I was introduced into the world by an old lady named Mrs. O'Reilly. She was a very pleasant old lady, the wife of a General, and one of those sociable, friendly, talkative people who do much to cheer their neighbours, particularly in a deadly-lively provincial place like Muddleton, where the standard of social intercourse is not very high. Mrs. O'Reilly had been in her day a celebrated beauty; she was now grey-haired and stout, but still there was something impressive about her, and few could resist the charm of her manner and the pleasant easy flow of her small talk. Her love of gossip amounted almost to a passion, and nothing came amiss to her; she liked to know everything about everybody, and in the main I think her interest was a kindly one, though she found that a little bit of scandal, every now and then, added a piquant flavour to the homely fare provided by the commonplace life of the Muddletonians.

I will now, without further preamble, begin the history of my life.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I assure you, my dear Lena, Mr. Zaluski is nothing less than a Nihilist!”

The sound waves set in motion by Mrs. O’Reilly’s words were tumultuously heaving in the atmosphere when I sprang into being, a young but perfectly formed and most promising slander. A delicious odour of tea pervaded the drawing-room, it was orange-flower pekoe, and Mrs. O’Reilly was just handing one of the delicate Crown Derby cups to her visitor, Miss Lena Houghton.

“What a shocking thing! Do you really mean it?” exclaimed Miss Houghton. “Thank you, cream but no sugar; don’t you know, Mrs. O’Reilly, that it is only Low-Church people who take sugar nowadays? But, really, now, about Mr. Zaluski? How did you find it out?”

“My dear, I am an old woman, and I have learnt in the course of a wandering life to put two and two together,” said Mrs. O’Reilly. She had somehow managed to ignore middle age, and had passed from her position of renowned beauty to the position which she now firmly and constantly claimed of many years and much experience. “Of course,” she continued, “like every one else, I was glad enough to be friendly and pleasant to Sigismund Zaluski, and as to his being a Pole, why, I think it rather pleased me than otherwise. You see, my dear, I have knocked about the world and

mixed with all kinds of people. Still, one must draw the line somewhere, and I confess it gave me a very painful shock to find that he had such violent antipathies to law and order. When he took Ivy Cottage for the summer I made the General call at once, and before long we had become very intimate with him; but, my dear, he's not what I thought him—not at all!”

“Well now, I am delighted to hear you say that,” said Lena Houghton, with some excitement in her manner, “for it exactly fits in with what I always felt about him. From the first I disliked that man, and the way he goes on with Gertrude Morley is simply dreadful. If they are not engaged they ought to be—that’s all I can say.”

“Engaged, my dear! I trust not,” said Mrs. O’Reilly. “I had always hoped for something very different for dear Gertrude. Quite between ourselves, you know, my nephew John Carew is over head and ears in love with her, and they would make a very good pair; don’t you think so?”

“Well, you see, I like Gertrude to a certain extent,” replied Lena Houghton. “But I never raved about her as so many people do. Still, I hope she will not be entrapped into marrying Mr. Zaluski; she deserves a better fate than that.”

“I quite agree with you,” said Mrs. O’Reilly, with a troubled look. “And the worst of it is, poor Gertrude is a girl who might very likely take up foolish revolution-

ary notions; she needs a strong wise husband to keep her in order and form her opinions. But is it really true that he flirts with her? This is the first I have heard of it. I can't think how it has escaped my notice."

"Nor I, for indeed he is up at the Morleys' pretty nearly every day. What with tennis, and music, and riding, there is always some excuse for it. I can't think what Gertrude sees in him, he is not even good-looking."

"There is a certain surface good-nature about him," said Mrs. O'Reilly. "It deceived even me at first. But, my dear Lena, mark my words: that man has a fearful temper; and I pray Heaven that poor Gertrude may have her eyes opened in time. Besides, to think of that little gentle, delicate thing marrying a Nihilist! It is too dreadful; really, quite too dreadful! John would never get over it!"

"The thing I can't understand is why all the world has taken him up so," said Lena Houghton. "One meets him everywhere, yet nobody seems to know anything about him. Just because he has taken Ivy Cottage for four months, and because he seems to be rich and good-natured, every one is ready to run after him."

"Well, well," said Mrs. O'Reilly, "we all like to be neighbourly, my dear, and a week ago I should have been ready to say nothing but good of him. But now my eyes have been opened. I'll tell you just how it was. We were sitting here, just as you and I are now, at afternoon

tea; the talk had flagged a little, and for the sake of something to say I made some remark about Bulgaria—not that I really knew anything about it, you know, for I’m no politician; still, I knew it was a subject that would make talk just now. My dear, I assure you I was positively frightened. All in a minute his face changed, his eyes flashed, he broke into such a torrent of abuse as I never heard in my life before.”

“Do you mean that he abused you?”

“Dear me, no! but Russia and the Czar, and tyranny and despotism, and many other things I had never heard of. I tried to calm him down and reason with him, but I might as well have reasoned with the cockatoo in the window. At last he caught himself up quickly in the middle of a sentence, strode over to the piano, and began to play as he generally does, you know, when he comes here. Well, would you believe it, my dear! instead of improvising or playing operatic airs as usual, he began to play a stupid little tune which every child was taught years ago, of course with variations of his own. Then he turned round on the music-stool with the oddest smile I ever saw, and said, “Do you know that air, Mrs. O’Reilly?”

“Yes,” I said; “but I forget now what it is.”

“It was composed by Pestal, one of the victims of Russian tyranny,” said he. “The executioner did his work badly, and Pestal had to be strung up twice. In

the interval he was heard to mutter, 'Stupid country, where they don't even know how to hang!'"

"Then he gave a little forced laugh, got up quickly, wished me good-bye, and was gone before I could put in a word."

"What a horrible story to tell in a drawing-room!" said Lena Houghton. "I envy Gertrude less than ever."

"Poor girl! What a sad prospect it is for her!" said Mrs. O'Reilly with a sigh. "Of course, my dear, you'll not repeat what I have just told you."

"Not for the world!" said Lena Houghton emphatically. "It is perfectly safe with me."

The conversation was here abruptly ended, for the page threw open the drawing-room door and announced 'Mr. Zaluski.'

"Talk of the angel," murmured Mrs. O'Reilly with a significant smile at her companion. Then skilfully altering the expression of her face, she beamed graciously on the guest who was ushered into the room, and Lena Houghton also prepared to greet him most pleasantly.

I looked with much interest at Sigismund Zaluski, and as I looked I partly understood why Miss Houghton had been prejudiced against him at first sight. He had lived five years in England, and nothing pleased him more than to be taken for an Englishman. He had had his silky black hair closely cropped in the

very hideous fashion of the present day; he wore the ostentatiously high collar now in vogue; and he tried to be sedulously English in every respect. But in spite of his wonderfully fluent speech and almost perfect accent, there lingered about him something which would not harmonise with that ideal of an English gentleman which is latent in most minds. Something he lacked, something he possessed, which interfered with the part he desired to play. The something lacking showed itself in his ineradicable love of jewellery and in a transparent habit of fibbing; the something possessed showed itself in his easy grace of movement, his delightful readiness to amuse and to be amused, and in a certain cleverness and rapidity of idea rarely, if ever, found in an Englishman.

He was a little above the average height and very finely built; but there was nothing striking in his aquiline features and dark grey eyes, and I think Miss Houghton spoke truly when she said that he was 'Not even good-looking.' Still, in spite of this, it was a face which grew upon most people, and I felt the least little bit of regret as I looked at him, because I knew that I should persistently haunt and harass him, and should do all that could be done to spoil his life.

Apparently he had forgotten all about Russia and Bulgaria, for he looked radiantly happy. Clearly his thoughts were engrossed with his own affairs, which,

in other words, meant with Gertrude Morley; and though, as I have since observed, there are times when a man in love is an altogether intolerable sort of being, there are other times when he is very much improved by the passion, and regards the whole world with a genial kindness which contrasts strangely with his previous cool cynicism.

“How delightful and home-like your room always looks!” he exclaimed, taking the cup of tea which Mrs. O’Reilly handed to him. “I am horribly lonely at Ivy Cottage. This house is a sort of oasis in the desert.”

“Why, you are hardly ever at home, I thought,” said Mrs. O’Reilly, smiling. “You are the lion of the neighbourhood just now; and I’m sure it is very good of you to come in and cheer a lonely old woman. Are you going to play me something rather more lively to-day?”

He laughed.

“Ah! Poor Pestal! I had forgotten all about our last meeting.”

“You were very much excited that day,” said Mrs. O’Reilly. “I had no idea that your political notions—”

He interrupted her

“Ah! no politics to-day, dear Mrs. O’Reilly. Let us have nothing but enjoyment and harmony. See, now, I will play you something very much more cheerful.”

And sitting down to the piano, he played the bridal march from ‘Lohengrin,’ then wandered off into an

improvised air, and finally treated them to some recollections of the 'Mikado.'

Lena Houghton watched him thoughtfully as she put on her gloves; he was playing with great spirit, and the words of the opera rang in her ears:—

For he's going to marry Yum-yum, Yum-yum,  
And so you had better be dumb, dumb, dumb!

I knew well enough that she would not follow this moral advice, and I laughed to myself because the whole scene was such a hollow mockery. The placid benevolent-looking old lady leaning back in her arm-chair; the girl in her blue gingham and straw hat preparing to go to the afternoon service; the happy lover entering heart and soul into Sullivan's charming music; the pretty room with its Chippendale furniture, its æsthetic hangings, its bowls of roses; and the sound of church bells wafted through the open window on the soft summer breeze.

Yet all the time I lingered there unseen, carrying with me all sorts of dread possibilities. I had been introduced into the world, and even if Mrs. O'Reilly had been willing to admit to herself that she had broken the ninth commandment, and had earnestly desired to recall me, all her sighs and tears and regrets would have availed nothing; so true is the saying, "Of thy

word unspoken thou art master; thy spoken word is master of thee.”

“Thank you.” “Thank you.” “How I envy your power of playing!”

The two ladies seemed to vie with each other in making pretty speeches, and Zaluski, who loved music and loved giving pleasure, looked really pleased. I am sure it did not enter his head that his two companions were not sincere, or that they did not wish him well. He was thinking to himself how simple and kindly the Muddleton people were, and how great a contrast this life was to his life in London; and he was saying to himself that he had been a fool to live a lonely bachelor life till he was nearly thirty, and yet congratulating himself that he had done so since Gertrude was but nineteen. Undoubtedly, he was seeing blissful visions of the future all the time that he replied to the pretty speeches, and shook hands with Lena Houghton, and opened the drawing-room door for her, and took out his watch to assure her that she had plenty of time and need not hurry to church.

Poor Zaluski! He looked so kindly and pleasant. Though I was only a slander, and might have been supposed to have no heart at all, I did feel sorry for him when I thought of the future and of the grief and pain which would persistently dog his steps.



## MY SECOND STAGE

Bear not false witness, slander not, nor lie;  
Truth is the speech of inward purity.

THE LIGHT OF ASIA.

In my first stage the reader will perceive that I was a comparatively weak and harmless little slander, with merely that taint of original sin which was to be expected in one of such parentage. But I developed with great rapidity; and I believe men of science will tell you that this is always the case with low organisms. That, for instance, while it takes years to develop the man from the baby, and months to develop the dog from the puppy, the baby monad will grow to maturity in an hour.

Personally I should have preferred to linger in Mrs. O'Reilly's pleasant drawing-room, for, as I said before, my victim interested me, and I wanted to observe him more closely and hear what he talked about. But I received orders to attend evensong at the parish church, and to haunt the mind of Lena Houghton.

As we passed down the High Street the bells rang

out loud and clear, and they made me feel the same slight sense of discomfort that I had felt when I looked at Zaluski; however, I went on, and soon entered the church. It was a fine old Gothic building, and the afternoon sunshine seemed to flood the whole place; even the white stones in the aisle were glorified here and there with gorgeous patches of colour from the stained glass windows. But the strange stillness and quiet oppressed me, I did not feel nearly so much at home as in Mrs. O'Reilly's drawing-room—to use a terrestrial simile, I felt like a fish out of water.

For some time, too, I could find no entrance at all into the mind of Lena Houghton. Try as I would, I could not distract her attention or gain the slightest hold upon her, and I really believe I should have been altogether baffled, had not the rector unconsciously come to my aid.

All through the prayers and psalms I had fought a desperate fight without gaining a single inch. Then the rector walked over to the lectern, and the moment he opened his mouth I knew that my time had come, and that there was a very fair chance of victory before me. Whether this clergyman had a toothache, or a headache, or a heavy load on his mind, I cannot say, but his reading was more lugubrious than the wind in an equinoctial gale. I have since observed that he was only a degree worse than many other clerical readers,

and that a strange and delightfully mistaken notion seems prevalent that the Bible must be read in a dreary and unnatural tone of voice, or with a sort of mournful monotony; it is intended as a sort of reverence, but I suspect that it often plays into the hands of my progenitor, as it most assuredly did in the present instance.

Hardly had the rector announced, "Here beginneth the forty-fourth verse of the sixteenth chapter of the book of the prophet Ezekiel," than a sort of relaxation took place in the mind I was attacking. Lena Houghton's attention could only have been given to the drearily read lesson by a very great effort; she was a little lazy and did not make the effort, she thought how nice it was to sit down again, and then the melancholy voice lulled her into a vague interval of thoughtless inactivity. I promptly seized my opportunity, and in a moment her whole mind was full of me. She was an excitable, impressionable sort of girl, and when once I had obtained an entrance into her mind I found it the easiest thing in the world to dominate her thoughts. Though she stood, and sat, and knelt, and curtsyed, and articulated words, her thoughts were entirely absorbed in me. I crowded out the Magnificat with a picture of Zaluski and Gertrude Morley. I led her through more terrible future possibilities in the second lesson than would be required for a three-volume novel. I entirely eclipsed the collects with reflections on

unhappy marriages; took her off *viâ* Russia and Nihilism in the State prayers, and by the time we arrived at St. Chrysostom had become so powerful that I had worked her mind into exactly the condition I desired.

The congregation rose. Lena Houghton, still dominated by me, knelt longer than the rest, but at last she got up and walked down the aisle, and I felt a great sense of relief and satisfaction. We were out in the open air once more, and I had triumphed; I was quite sure that she would tell the first person she met, for, as I have said before, she was entirely taken up with me, and to have kept me to herself would have required far more strength and unselfishness than she at that moment possessed. She walked slowly through the churchyard, feeling much pleased to see that the curate had just left the vestry door, and that in a few moments their paths must converge.

Mr. Blackthorne had only been ordained three or four years, and was a little younger, and much less experienced in the ways of the world, than Sigismund Zaluski. He was a good well-meaning fellow, a little narrow, a little prejudiced, a little spoiled by the devotion of the district visitors and Sunday School teachers; but he was honest and energetic, and as a worker among the poor few could have equalled him. He seemed to fancy, however, that with the poor his work ended,

and he was not always so wise as he might have been in Muddleton society.

“Good afternoon, Miss Houghton,” he exclaimed. “Do you happen to know if your brother is at home? I want just to speak to him about the choir treat.”

“Oh, he is sure to be in by this time,” said Lena.

And they walked home together.

“I am so glad to have this chance of speaking to you,” she began rather nervously. “I wanted particularly to ask your advice.”

Mr. Blackthorne, being human and young, was not unnaturally flattered by this remark. True, he was becoming well accustomed to this sort of thing, since the ladies of Muddleton were far more fond of seeking advice from the young and good-looking curate than from the elderly and experienced rector. They said it was because Mr. Blackthorne was so much more sympathetic, and understood the difficulties of the day so much better; but I think they unconsciously deceived themselves, for the rector was one of a thousand, and the curate, though he had in him the makings of a fine man, was as yet altogether crude and young.

“Was it about anything in your district?” he asked, devoutly hoping that she was not going to propound some difficult question about the origin of evil, or any other obscure subject. For though he liked the honour of being consulted, he did not always like the trouble

it involved, and he remembered with a shudder that Miss Houghton had once asked him his opinion about the 'Ethical Concept of the Good.'

"It was only that I was so troubled about something Mrs. O'Reilly has just told me," said Lena Houghton. "You won't tell any one that I told you?"

"On no account," said the curate, warmly.

"Well, you know Mr. Zaluski, and how the Morleys have taken him up?"

"Every one has taken him up," said the curate, with the least little touch of resentment in his tone. "I knew that the Morleys were his special friends; I imagine that he admires Miss Morley."

"Yes, every one thinks they are either engaged or on the brink of it. And oh, Mr. Blackthorne, can't you or somebody put a stop to it, for it seems such a dreadful fate for poor Gertrude?"

The curate looked startled.

"Why, I don't profess to like Mr. Zaluski," he said. "But I don't know anything exactly against him."

"But I do. Mrs. O'Reilly has just been telling me."

"What did she tell you?" he asked with some curiosity.

"Why, she has found out that he is really a Nihilist—just think of a Nihilist going about loose like this, and playing tennis at the rectory and all the good houses! And not only that, but she says he is altogether a dan-

gerous, unprincipled man with a dreadful temper. You can't think how unhappy she is about poor Gertrude, and so am I, for we were at school together and have always been friends."

"I am very sorry to hear about it," said Mr. Blackthorne, "but I don't see that anything can be done. You see, one does not like to interfere in these sort of things. It seems officious rather, and meddling."

"Yes, that is the worst of it," she replied, with a sigh. "I suppose we can do nothing. Still, it has been a great relief just to tell you about it and get it off my mind. I suppose we can only hope that something may put a stop to it all—we must just leave it to chance."

This sentiment amused me not a little. Leave it to chance indeed! Had she not caused me to grow stronger and larger by every word she uttered? And had not the conversation revealed to me Mr. Blackthorn's one vulnerable part? I knew well enough that I should be able to dominate his thoughts as I had done hers. Finding me burdensome, she had passed me on to somebody else with additions that vastly increased my working powers, and then she talked of leaving it to chance! The way in which mortals practise pious frauds on themselves is really delightful! And yet Lena Houghton was a good sort of girl, and had from her childhood repeated the catechism words which proclaim that, "My duty to my neighbour is to love him as