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Title: If Sinners Entice Thee

Author: William Le Queux

Illustrator: Harold Piffard

Release date: October 9, 2012 [EBook #41002]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Nick Hodson of London, England

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK IF SINNERS ENTICE THEE ***

William Le Queux

"If Sinners Entice Thee"

Chapter One.

Zertho.

"No, Zertho. You forget that Liane is my daughter, the daughter of Brooker of the Guards, once an officer, and still, I hope, a gentleman."

"Gentleman!" sneered the other with a curl of his lip.

Erle Brooker shrugged his shoulders, but did not reply.

"Yet many women would be eager enough to become Princess d'Auzac if they had the chance," observed the tall, dark-bearded, handsome man, speaking English with a slight accent as he leaned easily against the edge of the table, and glanced around the shabby, cheaply-furnished little dining-room. Sallow-faced, dark-eyed, broad-shouldered, he was aged about forty—with full lips and long tapering hands, white as a woman's.

"Both of us know the world, my dear fellow," answered Captain Erle Brooker at last, standing astride before the fireplace in which a gaudy Japanese umbrella had been placed to hide its ugliness. "Surely the five years we spent together were sufficient to show us that there are women—and women?"

"Of course, as I expected," the other cried cynically. "Now that you're back again in England, buried in this sleepy country village, you are becoming sentimental. I suppose it is respectable to be so; but it's hardly like you."

"You've prospered. I've fallen upon evil days."

"And you could have had similar luck if only you would have continued to run with me that snug little place in Nice, instead of showing the white feather," he said.

"It was entirely against my grain to fleece those beardless boys. I'll play fair, or not at all."

"Sentiment again! It's your curse, Brooker."

"The speculation no doubt proved a veritable gold mine, as of course it must. But I had a second reason in dissolving our partnership."

"Liane urged you?"

"Yes."

"And you took her advice, the advice of a mere girl!" he laughed contemptuously.

"Luck is always with her," the Captain answered. "She sat beside me and prompted me on the occasion of my last big coup at roulette."

"A sort of sorceress, eh?"

Brooker smiled coldly, but again made no reply. "Well," continued his companion. "Do you intend to accept my proposal?"

"Certainly not," replied the luckless gamester. "I'll never sacrifice my daughter's happiness."

"Rubbish!"

"I have already decided."

Zertho was silent; his features became fierce and authoritative. His was an arrestive face, indicating rare, possibly prodigious, mental and also bodily activity, an activity that, unless curbed and restrained by carefully cultivated habits, might become distorted, and thus become injurious to himself as well as to others. Two rows of strong white teeth redeemed a large mouth from the commonplace, but those teeth were seldom seen—never, indeed, unless their owner laughed, and if smiles were rare, laughter still more rarely disturbed the steady composure of that saturnine countenance. Yet there was an individuality about the man which produced interest, though not always an agreeable interest, much less liking. He made an impression; he produced an effect upon the imagination that was not easily forgotten. Again, regarding the Captain keenly, he asked:

"Don't you think I'm straight?"

"As straight as you ever were, Zertho," the other answered ambiguously, with a light laugh. "But if you want a wife, surely you can fancy some other girl besides Liane. I'm afraid we know a little too much of each other to trust one another very far."

There was another long silence. The golden sunset streamed in at the open window, which revealed an old-fashioned garden filled with fragrant roses, and a tiny lawn bounded by a hedgerow beyond. Through the garden ran a paved path to the white dusty road. The afternoon had been hot and drowsy. Upon the warm wind was borne in the sound of children at play in the village street of Stratfield Mortimer, while somewhere in the vicinity the shoe-smith's hammer fell upon his anvil with musical clang. The house stood at the east end of the long straggling village, towards Reading, a small, old-fashioned cottage, picturesque in its ivy mantle, with deep mullions, diamond panes, and oaken doors. A year ago an old maiden lady, who had resided there for a quarter of a century, had died, and the village had been thrown into a state of commotion, as villages are wont to be, by the arrival of new comers—Captain Erle Brooker, his daughter Liane, and Nellie Bridson, her companion. The latter was daughter of Jack Bridson, a brother officer of Brooker's. Left an orphan at nine years of age she had been brought up by the Captain, and throughout her whole life had been Liane's inseparable friend. Soon, however, the village gossips found food for talk. The furniture they brought with them bore the distinct impress of having been purchased secondhand, the maid-of-all-work was a buxom Frenchwoman who bought stuff, for soups and salads, and the two girls habitually spoke French when together, in preference to English. Hence they were at once dubbed "fine, finnikin' foreigners," and regarded with suspicion by all the country folk from Beech Hill away to Silchester.

The thin-faced vicar made a formal call, as vicars will, but, as might be expected, received but a cold welcome from the ex-cavalry officer, and this fact spreading rapidly throughout the district, no one else ever crossed their threshold. This social ostracism annoyed Brooker, not for his own sake, but for that of the girls. The reason he had decided to live in the country in preference to London, was, first because it was cheaper, and secondly, because he had a vague idea that both girls would enter a pleasant and inexpensive circle where the dissipations would be mainly in the form of tea and tennis. In this, however, he and they had been sorely disappointed.

Zertho had spoken the truth. Stratfield Mortimer was indeed deadly dull after Ostend or the Riviera. He was getting already tired of posing as a half-pay officer, and speaking to nobody except the postmistress or the garrulous father of the local inn-keeper. Yet the one thing needful was money, and since he had renounced gambling, he had had scarcely sufficient to live from hand to mouth. Yet, although he had hardly a sou in his pocket, his imperturbable good humour never deserted him. His career had, indeed, been full of strange vicissitudes; of feast and fast, of long nights and heavy play, of huge stakes won and lost with smile or curse, of fair game and sharping, of fleecing youngsters and bluffing his elders in nearly every health-resort in Europe. Easy-going to a fault, he bore his fifty years merrily, with scarcely a grey hair in his head, and although his ruddy, well-shaven face bore no sign of anxiety it was a trifle blotchy, caused by high living and long nights of play, while twenty years of an existence on his wits, had so sharpened his intelligence that in his steel-grey eyes was a keen penetrating look that had long become habitual. As careless and indolent now as he had ever been, he nevertheless dressed just as carefully, walked as lightly, and held his head just as high as in the days of his prosperity when a smart cavalry officer, younger son of a well-known peer, he could draw a cheque for thirty thousand. When he reflected upon his present position, hampered by the two girls dependent upon him, he merely laughed a strange cynical laugh, the same that he had laughed across the roulette-table when he had flung down and lost his last louis.

"What's your game, burying yourself in this abominable hole?" inquired his whilom partner, presently. "I called at the National Sporting Club as soon as I got to London, expecting to see something of you, but the hall-porter told me that you lived down in this Sleepy-Hollow, and never came to town. So I resolved to run down and look you up."

"Can't afford to live in London," the Captain answered, rolling a cigarette carefully between his fingers, before lighting it.

"Hard up! yet you refuse my offer!" observed Zertho, laughing. "You're an enigma, Brooker. Money would put you on your legs again, my dear fellow."

"I don't doubt it," the other replied. "But I have reasons."

Zertho d'Auzac knit his dark brows, glancing at the Captain with a look of quick suspicion.

"You have expectations for Liane—eh?"

No reply escaped Brooker's lips. He was thinking deeply.

"Any other man wouldn't make you such an offer," the other continued, in a tone of contempt.

Instantly there was an angry glint in the Captain's eyes.

"I tell you, Zertho, I'll never let my daughter marry you. You, of all men, shall not have her—no, by Heaven! not for a hundred thousand pounds."

The other's face darkened in anger. But he turned away, giving vent to a short, harsh laugh, and with feigned good humour advanced towards the window, and whistling softly, took out his cigarette-case, a plain silver one, whereon his coronet and monogram were engraved.

At that moment two graceful, bright-faced girls entered the gate from the road, sauntering leisurely up the path towards the house. Dressed alike in dark well-made skirts, cool-looking blouses of cream crêpon and straw sailor hats with black bands, they walked together, the sound of their laughter ringing through the room. The taller of the pair was Liane Brooker, slim, with infinite grace, a face undeniably beautiful, a pair of clear grey eyes the depths of which seemed unfathomable, nose and mouth that denoted buoyancy of spirits and sincerity of heart, hair dressed neatly in the latest mode, and that easy swing about her carriage peculiar alone to Frenchwomen. Her warmth of Southern blood and large expressive eyes she inherited from her mother, who came from St Tropez in the Var, and her strange cosmopolitan education had already made her a thorough woman of the world. Her character was altogether a curiously complex one. Though fresh, bright and happy, she, the daughter of an adventurer, had seen a good deal of the seamy side of life, where the women were déclassé, and the men rogues and outsiders; yet, in fairness to her father, it must be admitted that, even in his most reckless moments, he had always exerted towards both girls keen solicitude. Her beauty was peerless. Hundreds of men had said so among themselves. Such a face as hers would have made a fortune on the stage; therefore it was little wonder that she should be desired as wife by Prince Zertho d'Auzac, the man who under the plain cognomen of Zertho d'Auzac was once a fellow blackleg with her father, and now a wealthy personage by reason of his inheritance of the great family estates in Luxembourg. Well he knew what a sensation her beauty would create in Berlin or St Petersburg, and with the object of obtaining her he had travelled to England. Pure and good, full of high thoughts and refined feeling, Liane Brooker existed amid strangely incongruous surroundings. She had been reared in the worst atmosphere of vice and temptation to be found in the whole of Europe, yet had passed through unscathed and uncorrupted.

Her companion was fair, with bright pink-and-white complexion, rosy, delicate cheeks, and merry blue eyes. Nelly was scarcely as handsome perhaps as Liane, yet hers was an almost perfect type of English beauty. Her hands were not quite so small or refined as her friend's, and in contrast with the latter's carriage hers was not quite so graceful, nor was her figure so supple; yet the mass of fluffy blond curls that peeped beneath her hat, straying across her brow, gave softness to her features, and her delicate pointed chin added a decided piquancy to a face that was uncommonly pretty and winning.

Both girls, catching sight at the same moment of Zertho's heavy watch-chain at the window, muttered together in an undertone. That day the Prince had arrived unexpectedly to lunch, sat down to their meagre dish of cold mutton, as he had often done in the old days when funds had been low, and having indicated his desire to talk business alone with the Captain, they had gone out together to post a letter at the little grocery store at the opposite end of the village.

When they discovered him still there, both pulled wry faces. He had never been a favourite of either. Liane had always instinctively disliked this man, who was the scapegrace of a noble family. His cynical look and sly manner had caused her to distrust him, and it had been mainly on this account that her father had dissolved his partnership in the private gaming-house they had carried on during the previous winter in Nice, an institution remembered with regret by many a young man who had gone to the Riviera for health and pleasure, only to return ruined. Zertho was not entirely unconscious of Liane's antipathy towards him; he well knew that without her father's aid his cause must be foredoomed to failure. But he never on any single occasion acted in undue haste. It was his proud boast that if ever he set his heart upon doing a thing he could quietly possess his soul in patience, for years if necessary, till the right moment arrived when he could execute his plans with success. Judging from the light, pleasant greeting he gave both girls as they entered, it was the tactics of craft and cunning he now intended to follow.

He chaffed Liane upon becoming a village belle, whereupon she, quick at repartee, tossed her handsome head, her heart beating fast, almost tumultuously, as she answered:

"Better that than the old life, M'sieur."

"Oh, so you, too, have settled and become puritanical!" he laughed. "You English, you are always utterly incomprehensible. Have you yet joined the Anti-Gambling League?"

"We are very happy here," she replied, heedless of his taunt. "I have no desire to return to the Continent, to that old life of feast one day and fast the next."

"Nor I," chimed in Nellie, full of fun and vivacity. "This place is sometimes horribly dull, it's true; but we always get our dinner, which we didn't on many occasions when we were abroad. Look at our house! Surely this place, with its little English garden, is better than those dingy rooms on the third floor in the Rue Dalpozzo in Nice. Besides, the Captain never swears now."

"Very soon he'll become a teacher in the local Sunday School, I suppose," sneered Zertho.

"I cannot understand your reason for coming here to jeer at our poverty," Liane exclaimed angrily, drawing herself up quickly. "At least my father lives honestly."

"I sincerely beg your pardon, and your father's also, mademoiselle," answered the Prince, bowing stiffly in foreign manner. "If my remarks have annoyed you I'm sure I will at once withdraw them with a thousand apologies. I had no intention, I assure you, of causing one instant's pain. I was merely joking. It all seems so droll."

"I know you well enough, Zertho, not to be annoyed at anything you may say," the Captain interrupted, good-humouredly as always. "However, speak what you have to say to me alone, not before the girls."

"The ladies will, I know, forgive me if I promise not to again offend," the Prince said. His eager eyes scanned Liane with such intense anxiety that they seemed to burn in their sockets, yet mingled with this fiery admiration, there was a strange covered menace in their expression. Taking out his watch a second later he added, "But I'm late, I see. Ten minutes only to catch my train back to London, and I don't know the way. Who'll guide me to the station? You, Liane?"

"No," answered her father. "Nelly shall go. I want Liane to deliver a message for me."

Prince d'Auzac bit his lip. But next instant he laughed gaily and saying: "Then come along Nelly," shook hands with Liane and her father, bade them "Au revoir" with a well-feigned bonhomie, and lounged out of the room.

Meanwhile, Nelly wheeled out her cycle, and announcing her intention of piloting their visitor to the station, and afterwards riding over to Burghfield village to make some purchase, mounted her machine and rode slowly on besides the Prince, chatting merrily.

As soon as they had left, Liane inquired of her father what she should do; but he told her briefly that it had been merely an excuse to prevent her going to the station, as he knew she disliked Zertho's society.

"Yes, father," she answered with a slight sigh, "I think him simply hateful. I'm convinced that he's neither your friend, nor mine."

Then glancing at the clock, she passed out of the house humming to herself as she walked slowly down the garden path, into the white dusty high road.

For a long time Brooker stood twirling his moustache, gazing aimlessly out into the crimson blaze of the dying day.

"I can't think why Zertho should have taken this trouble to look me up again," he murmured to himself. "I had hoped that he had cut me entirely, and believed that terrible incident was forgotten. The excuse about Liane is all very well. But I know him. He means mischief—he means mischief."

And his face grew ashen pale as his eyes were lost in deep and serious contemplation.

A sudden thought had flashed across his mind. It held him petrified, for he half-feared that he had guessed the bitter, ghastly truth.

Chapter Two.

A Beggar on Horseback.

Sir John Stratfield, of Stratfield Court, lay dying on that afternoon. For years he had been a confirmed invalid, and in the morning the two renowned doctors who had been telegraphed for from London had declared his recovery impossible. The Court, a fine old pile with grey time-worn walls half-hidden by ivy, stood in its spacious park about a mile from Stratfield Mortimer, on the hill between that village and Burghfield.

As the rays of crimson sunset slanted in through the one unshaded window there was a profound stillness in the sick-room. At the bedside stood four solemn-faced men, patiently watching for the end. The spark of life flickered on, and now and then the dying man uttered words low and indistinct. Two of the men were doctors, the third Richard Harrison, of the firm of Harrison and James, solicitors, of Bedford Row, and the fourth George Stratfield, the Baronet's younger son.

The haggard man had spoken once or twice, giving certain instructions to his solicitor, but at last there was a long silence, unbroken save by the rustling of the stiff grey gown of the nurse, who entered for an instant, then left again in silence.

The eccentric old man, whose reputation throughout Berkshire was that of a tyrannical landlord, a bigoted magistrate and a miserly father, at last opened his dull filmy eyes. The white bony fingers lying on the coverlet twitched uneasily, as, glancing at his son, he beckoned him forward.

Obediently the young man approached.

"Promise me one thing, George," the dying man exclaimed with an effort, in a voice so low as to be almost indistinguishable. "Promise me that you will never marry that woman."

"Why, father? Why are you so bitterly prejudiced against Liane?"

"I have my reasons," was the answer.

"But I love her," the young man urged. "I can marry no one else."

"Then go abroad, forget her, and remain a bachelor. Erle Brooker's daughter shall never become a Stratfield," was the harsh reply, uttered with considerable difficulty.

George, a tall well-built young fellow, with fair hair, a fair moustache and blue eyes, was a typical specimen of the English gentleman, still in his well-worn riding breeches and tweed coat, for that morning before the arrival of the

doctors he had, in order to get a prescription made up, ridden hard into Reading. He made no reply to his father's words, he did not wish to offend the Baronet, yet he could not give a pledge which he intended to break.

"Will you not promise?" Sir John again demanded, a strange look overspreading his haggard ashen features.

Again a deep silence fell.

"No," answered his son at last. "I cannot promise to give up Liane, for I love her."

"Love! Bah. I tell you that woman shall never be your wife. If John were here, instead of with his regiment in India, he would fully endorse every word I say. Brooker's girl shall never enter our family."

"What do you know against her?" the son asked dismayed. "Why, you have never set your eyes upon either father or daughter! Some confounded eavesdropper must have been telling you of our clandestine meetings, and this has annoyed you."

"I am aware of more than you imagine," the dying man answered. "Will you, or will you not, promise to obey my wish?"

There was a look of firm determination in the old man's countenance; a look which the son did not fail to notice.

"No, father," he answered. "Once for all, I decline."

"Then if such be your decision you must take the consequences. You are an unworthy son."

"In the matter of my marriage I shall follow my own inclinations entirely," the young man said calmly.

"Very well," the Baronet answered, and making a sign to his solicitor, Harrison, commanded his son to leave the room.

At first George demurred; but in accordance with the suggestion of the doctors that the wishes of their patient should be respected at that crisis-time, he went out, and passing downstairs to the library threw himself back in one of the roomy leather chairs.

Yes, he loved Liane. With her vivacious half-English, half-French mannerisms, her sweet musical accent, her dark beauty and grey trusting eyes, she was unlike any other woman he had ever beheld. They had met by chance on Mortimer Common a few months before. One morning, while riding towards Ufton, he had found her at the roadside endeavouring to re-adjust her cycle, which had met with a slight accident. His proffered services were gratefully accepted, and from that moment their friendship had ripened into passionate and devoted love. Almost daily they took long walks and rides together, but so secret had been their meetings that until half-an-hour ago he had no idea that his father was aware of the truth. He had purposely kept the matter from Sir John because of his severe illness, yet someone, whom he knew not, must have watched him and gone to the Baronet with some foul libellous story.

As he lay back in the chair, his gaitered legs crossed, his sun-browned hands clasped behind his head, gazing up to the old panelled ceiling, he reflected that in a few hours the Court would no longer be his home. His elder brother, Major Stratfield, who for the past five years had been in India with his regiment, the East Surrey, had been telegraphed for, and in a few weeks would arrive and become Sir John Stratfield, while he, dogged by the misfortune attendant on being a younger son, would go forth from the old place with an income the extent of which he could not know until after the will had been read.

George's life had certainly not been a happy one. Since his mother's death a few months after his birth, his father had become a hard man, irritable and misanthropic. He kept no company, begrudged every penny his son cost him at college, and appeared to take a delight in obtaining the ill-will of all his neighbours. He knew that scarcely a person in the parish would regret his decease, and used frequently to comment with self-satisfaction upon the unenviable reputation he had gained. This was merely eccentricity, people said; but for George it was decidedly unpleasant, for while he was welcomed in every house, his father was never invited. Sometimes this fact impressed itself forcibly on the old man's mind, but on such occasions he would only laugh contemptuously, saying:

"Ah, the Stratfields of Stratfield can afford to treat with contempt these mushroom merchants without breeding, and without pedigree."

At whatever George had achieved the baronet had never shown the slightest sign of satisfaction. His career at Balliol had been brilliant, he had eaten his dinners at Lincoln's Inn and been duly called to the Bar, but all to no purpose, for almost as soon as he had been "called," his father, strangely enough, refused to grant him any further allowance unless he gave up his chambers and returned to live at Stratfield. This he had been forced to do, although much against his inclination, for he preferred his friends of the Common Room to the society of his eccentric parent. However, it had after all turned out for the best, he reflected, because a month after he had come back he had met the grey-eyed girl whose beauty held him entranced, and whom he intended to ask to become his wife. From the very first it had been arranged between them that they should keep their acquaintance secret, only Nelly Bridson being aware of it, and it was she who met George with notes from Liane when, on rare occasions, the latter was unable to keep her appointments. He had found both girls extremely pleasant companions, and through the sunny months the bright, halcyon days had passed happily.

In obedience to Liane's wish he had refrained from calling upon Captain Brooker. Truth to tell, the refined, ingenuous girl, with her French chic and charming manner, was ashamed of their shabby home, of her father's frayed but well-cut clothes, of the distinct evidences of their poverty, and feared lest her lover should discover the secret of her father's rather ignominious past. She had told him that the Captain was a half-pay officer, and that her mother had

been French; but she had been careful never to refer to the polyglot society in which they had moved on the Continent, nor to the fact that she was daughter of a man well-known in all the gaming establishments in Europe. All that was of the past, she had assured herself. If George knew the truth, then certainly he would forsake her. And she loved him no less than he adored her. Hence her lover had been puzzled not a little by her steadfast refusal to tell him anything definite regarding her earlier life, and the equal reticence of her foster sister. Of course, he could not fail to recognise behind this veil of mystery some family secret, yet in his buoyant frame of mind, happy in his new-found love, it troubled him but little. Liane, his enchantress, loved him; that was sufficient.

For more than half-an-hour he sat in the old brown library in the same position, plunged deep in gloomy reflection. The sunset streamed in through the big windows of stained glass whereon were the arms of the Stratfields with the motto, "Non vi, sed voluntate," which his ancestors had borne through six centuries. The ancient room, lined from floor to ceiling with the books of past generations, seemed in that calm silent hour aglow with many colours.

The suddenness with which the storm-cloud had broken away, and the sun's last rays again shone forth, aroused him. He glanced at his watch. It was already seven o'clock, and Liane was awaiting him beneath the railway bridge in Cross Lane, fully a mile away.

He made a movement to rise, but next moment, reflecting that he could not leave the house while his father lay dying, sank back into his chair again. Liane knew of his father's illness, and would undoubtedly wait, as she had often waited before.

Yet why was he sitting there inactive and patient? The bitter truth recurred to him. He had refused to give his pledge, and had therefore been banished from his father's presence. And this because he loved her!

He rose, and gazed out down the long shady avenue of chestnuts, that led across the broad Park towards the village. Yes, he loved Liane, and come what might he would marry her. Soon his father would pass away; then he would be free to act as he chose. After all, he was pleased that he had not given a false pledge to a dying man. At least he had been frank.

His brother John had never been his friend, therefore he knew that soon he must leave Stratfield. One thing he regretted to part from was the library, that fine old room in which he now stood, where he had spent so many long and studious days, and where he had sought refuge almost daily from his father's ill-temper. With hands deep in his pockets, he gazed slowly around the old place with its cosy armchairs and big writing-table, then sighed heavily.

He was thinking of his father's angry declaration, "Erle Brooker's daughter shall never become a Stratfield." What did he mean? Were those words uttered because of some absurd prejudice, or was he actually aware of something which both Liane and Nelly had carefully striven to conceal? Again he glanced at his watch. The hour was fleeting. Soon his well-beloved would weary of waiting and return home.

He pressed the electric button, and at once his summons was answered by a neat maid.

"Tell Morton to saddle the bay mare and hold her ready. I may want to ride," he said.

"Yes, sir," the girl answered, surprised at his unusual brusqueness.

The door closed, and again he was alone.

"At least I'll try and overtake her," he murmured. "I must see her to-night at all hazards," and as the sunlight faded he paced the room from door to window, his chin resting upon his breast.

Soon the door again slowly opened, and the old solicitor entering, closed it after him.

"It is my painful duty to tell you, Mr George, that your father has passed quietly away," he said, with that professionally solemn air that lawyers can assume when occasion demands.

The young man standing with his back turned, gazing out upon the Park, made no response.

"Before he drew his last breath I asked him three times whether he would see you again, but he firmly declined. You caused him the most intense displeasure by your refusal to grant his request," the solicitor continued.

"Am I not my own master, Harrison?" the young man snapped, turning to him sharply.

"Certainly," the other answered, raising his grey eyebrows. "I admit that I have no right whatever to interfere with your private affairs, but I certainly cannot regard your attitude and your father's subsequent action without considerable regret."

"What do you mean?"

"Apart from my professional connection with the Stratfield estate I have been, you will remember, a friend of your father's through many years, therefore it pains me to think that in Sir John's dying moments you should have done this."

George Stratfield glanced quickly at the white-haired lawyer. Then he said,—

"I suppose my father has treated me badly at his death, as he did throughout his life."

"Yes."

"Well, let me know the worst," the young man exclaimed, sighing; "Heaven knows, I don't expect very much."

"When the will is formally read you will know everything," the other answered drily.

"A moment ago you said you were a friend of my father's. Surely if you are you will not keep me in suspense regarding my future."

"Suspense is entirely unnecessary," answered the lawyer, his sphinx-like face relaxing into a cold smile.

"Why?"

"Well, unfortunately, you need not expect anything."

"Not anything?" gasped the young man, blankly. "Then am I penniless?"

The solicitor nodded, and opening a paper he had held behind him on entering, said,—

"When you had left the room half-an-hour ago Sir John expressed a desire to make an addition to his will, and entirely against my inclination made me write what you see here. He signed it while still in his right mind, the two doctors witnessing it. It is scarcely a professional proceeding to show it to you at this early stage, nevertheless, perhaps, as you are the son of my old friend, and it so closely concerns your future welfare, you may as well know the truth at once. Read for yourself."

George took the paper in his trembling fingers and read the six long lines of writing, the ink of which was scarcely yet dry. Three times he read them ere he could understand their exact purport. The cold formal words crushed all joy from his heart, for he knew, alas! that the woman he loved could never be his.

It was the death-warrant to all his hopes and aspirations. He could not now ask Liane to be his wife.

With set teeth he sighed, flung down the will upon the table with an angry gesture, and casting himself again into his armchair, sat staring straight before him without uttering a word.

In addition to being cruel and unjust the codicil was certainly of a most extraordinary character. By it there was bequeathed to "my son George Basil Stratfield" the sum of one hundred thousand pounds on one condition only, namely, that within two years he married Mariette, daughter of a certain Madame Lepage, whose address was given as 89, Rue Toullier, Paris. If, however, it was discovered that Mariette was already married, or if she refused to accept the twenty thousand pounds that were to be offered her on condition that she consented to marry his son, then one-half the amount, namely, 50,000 pounds, was to be paid by the executors to George, and the remaining 50,000 pounds, together with the 20,000 pounds, was to revert to his elder brother.

"It certainly is a most extraordinary disposition," old Mr Harrison reflected aloud, taking up the will again, and re-reading the words he had written at his dead client's dictation.

"How does my father think I can marry a woman I've never seen?" cried the son. "Why, the thing's absolutely absurd. He must have been insane when he ordered you to write such a preposterous proposal."

"No, he was entirely in his right mind," answered the elder man, calmly. "I must confess myself quite as surprised as you are; nevertheless, it is certain that unless you offer marriage to this mysterious young person you will obtain nothing."

"It is my father's vengeance," the son cried, in a tone full of bitterness and disappointment. "I desire to marry Liane, the woman I adore, and in order to prevent me he seeks to bind me to some unknown Frenchwoman."

"Well, in any case, effort must be made to find her," Harrison observed. "You surely will not let fifty thousand pounds slip through your fingers. There is a chance that she is already married, or that she will refuse the twenty thousand pounds which I shall be compelled to offer her."

"But I will only marry Liane," George cried, impetuously.

"My dear young man, yours is a mere foolish fancy. You cannot, nay you must not, render yourself a pauper merely because of this girl, who happens to have attracted you just for the moment. In a year's time you will regard the matter from a common-sense point of view. Your proper course is to give up all thought of the young lady, and unite with me in the search for this mysterious Mariette Lepage."

"I decline to abandon Liane," George answered with promptness. "If I am a pauper, well, I must bear it. My ruin is, I suppose, the last of my father's eccentricities. I'm the scapegoat of the family."

"It is, nevertheless, my duty to advise you," the elder man went on, standing before the empty fireplace with his arms folded. "In any case I shall be compelled to find this woman. Have you never heard your late father speak of any family of the name of Lepage?"

"Never. He has not been out of England for twenty years, therefore I suppose it's someone he knew long ago. What could have been his object?"

"As far as I could glean it was twofold. First, he believed that the fact of having left this sum just beyond your reach would cause you intense chagrin; and, secondly, that if you did not marry this unknown woman, you will still be unable to marry the girl against whom he held such a strange deep-rooted objection."

"Why did he object to her, Harrison? Tell me confidentially what you know," urged the young man earnestly.

"I only know what he told me a few days ago," the solicitor replied. "He said he had ascertained that you had taken many clandestine walks and rides with Liane Brooker, and he declared that such a woman was no fitting wife for you."

"Did he give any further reason?" the other demanded.

"None. He merely said that if you declined to abandon all thought of her you should not have a penny."

"And he has kept his word," observed George, gloomily.

"Unfortunately it appears so."

"He was unjust—cruelly unjust!" George protested. "I strove hard at the Bar, and had already obtained a few briefs when he recalled me here to be his companion. He would not allow me to follow my profession, yet he has now cast me adrift without resources."

"You certainly have my entire sympathy," the old lawyer declared, kindly. "But don't take the matter too much to heart. The woman may be already married. In this case you will receive fifty thousand."

George's face relaxed into a faint smile.

"I have no desire to hear of or see the woman at all," he answered. "Act as you think fit, but remember that I shall never offer her marriage—never."

"She may be a pretty girl," suggested the elder man.

"And she may be some bleary-eyed old hag," snapped the dead man's son. "It is evident from the wording of the clause that my father has heard nothing of either mother or daughter for some years."

"That's all the more in your favour; because if she is thirty or so, the chances are that she is married. At all costs we must discover her."

"The whole thing is a confounded mystery," George observed. "Who these people are is an enigma."

"Entirely so," the solicitor acquiesced. "There is something exceedingly mysterious about the affair. The combined circumstances are bewildering in the extreme. First, the lady you admire bears a French name, next your father hates her because of some fact of which he is aware regarding her family, and thirdly, in order to prevent you marrying her, he endeavours by an ingenious and apparently carefully-planned device, to induce you to wed a woman whose existence is unknown to us all. He was not a man who acted without strong motives, therefore I cannot help suspecting that behind all this lies some deep mystery."

"Mystery! Of what character?"

"I have no idea. We must first find Mariette Lepage."

"My future wife," laughed George bitterly, rising wearily from his chair.

"Yes, the woman who is to receive twenty thousand pounds for marrying you," repeated the solicitor smiling.

"No, Harrison," declined the young man as he moved slowly across the room with head slightly bent. "I'll never marry her, however fascinating she may be. Liane is pure and good; I shall marry only her."

And opening the door impatiently he snatched up his cap, strode along the hall, and out to where his man held the bay mare in readiness.

"Ah, well!" Harrison muttered aloud when he was alone. "We shall see, young man. We shall see. I thought myself as shrewd as most men, but if I'm not mistaken there's a mystery, strange and inexplicable, somewhere; a mystery which seems likely to lead to some amazing developments. It's hard upon poor George, very hard; but if my client was so foolish as to desire the family skeleton to be dragged from its chest his kith and kin must of necessity bear the consequences."

With a word to Morton, most exemplary of servants, George sprang into the saddle, and a moment later was galloping down the long straight avenue. The brilliant afterglow had now faded, dusk had fallen, and he feared that Liane, having kept the appointment, would have left disappointed and returned home. Therefore he spurred the mare onward, and was soon riding hard towards the unfrequented by-road known as Cross Lane.

With a heavy heart he told himself that he must say good-bye to love, good-bye to hope, good-bye to ambition, good-bye to all of life except the dull monotonous routine of empty days, and a restless empty heart.

"I can't tell her I'm a pauper," he murmured aloud, after galloping a long way in dogged silence. "She'll know, alas! soon enough. Then, when the truth is out, she'll perhaps discard me; while I suppose I shall go to the bad as so many fellows have done before me. Of what use am I without the means to marry? To love her now is only to befool her. Henceforth I'm sailing under false colours. Yet I love her better than life; better than anything on earth. I'm indeed a beggar on horseback!"

And he laughed a hollow bitter laugh as he rode along beneath the oaks where the leafy unfrequented lane dipped suddenly to pass below the railway, the quiet lonely spot where, unobserved, he so often met his well-beloved. So

engrossed had he been in his own sad thoughts that the stumbling of the mare alone brought him back to a consciousness of things around. The light had paled suddenly out of the evening atmosphere; the gloom was complete. Eagerly he looked ahead, half expecting to catch a glimpse of her well-known neat figure, but in disappointment he saw her not. It was too late he knew. She had evidently waited in vain, and afterwards returned to the village when the dusk had deepened.

Still he rode forward, the mare's hoofs sounding loudly as they clattered beneath the archway, until suddenly, as he emerged on the other side, a sight met his gaze which caused him to pull up quickly with a loud cry of dismay.

In the centre of the road, hidden from view until that instant, by reason of the sudden bend, a girl was lying flat with arms outstretched, her face in the thick white dust, while beside her was her cycle, left where it had fallen.

Instantly he swung himself from the saddle, dashed towards her, and lifted her up. Her straw hat had fallen off, her fair hair was dishevelled, and her dark skirt covered with dust. But there was yet another thing which held him transfixed with horror. In the dim fast-fading light he noticed that her blouse bore at the neck a small stain of bright crimson.

It was Nelly Bridson. She was rigid in death. The pallor of her refined, delicate face was rendered the more ghastly by the blood that had oozed from the corners of her arched mouth. Her small gloved hands were tightly clenched, her features haggard, convulsed and drawn by a last paroxysm of excruciating agony.

In her soft white neck was an ugly bullet wound. She had been shot by an unknown hand.

Chapter Three.

"We must not Marry!"

George Stratfield stood aghast and horrified. It was nearly dark, but there still remained sufficient light to reveal the terrible truth that Nelly Bridson, his gay, vivacious friend, had been foully murdered. Tenderly he lifted her, and placed his hand upon her heart. But there was no movement. It had ceased its beating.

Her face, with its hard drawn features so unlike hers, was absolutely hideous in death. Her hair was whitened by the dust, while her blue eyes were wide open, staring fixedly into space with a look of inexpressible horror.

For some moments, still kneeling beside her inanimate form, George hesitated. Suddenly his eager eyes caught sight of some round flat object lying in the dust within his reach. He stretched forth his hand and picked it up, finding to his surprise that it was an exquisitely-painted old miniature of a beautiful woman, set round with fine brilliants. He held it close to his eyes, examining it minutely until convinced of a fact most amazing. This miniature was the very valuable portrait by Cosway of Lady Anne Stratfield, a noted beauty of her time, which for many years had been missing from the collection at Stratfield Court. It corresponded exactly in every particular with the description his father had so often given him of the missing portrait, the disappearance of which had always been a mystery.

He remained speechless, dumbfounded at the discovery. At length a thought flashed across his mind, that by prompt action the assassin might perhaps be discovered. He could not bear the appalled agonised gaze of those glazed, stony eyes which seemed fixed despairingly upon him, therefore he closed them and prepared to move the body to the roadside. Suddenly he recollected that such action would be unwise. The police should view the victim where she had fallen. Therefore in breathless haste he sprang again into the saddle, and tore down into Stratfield Mortimer, a distance of a mile and a half, as hard as the mare could gallop.

Quickly he summoned the village constable and the doctor. The former, before leaving for the scene scribbled a telegram to Reading requesting the assistance of detectives; then both returned with him to the spot. When they reached it they found the body still undisturbed, and a cursory examination made by the doctor by aid of the constable's lantern quickly corroborated George's belief that the unfortunate girl had been shot through the throat.

Nearly an hour the three men waited impatiently for the arrival of the detectives, speaking in hushed tones, examining the recovered miniature and discussing the tragedy, until at last the lights of a trap were seen in the distance, and very soon two plain-clothes officers joined them, inspected the body and the tiny portrait, and made a close examination of the road in every direction. In the dust they found the mark of her tyre, and followed it back beneath the railway arch and up upon the road towards Burghfield. With the rays of their lanterns upon the dust they all followed the track, winding sometimes but distinct, for about three hundred yards, when suddenly, instead of proceeding along the lane, it turned into a gateway leading into a field.

This fact puzzled them; but soon, on examining the rank grass growing between the gate and the road, they found it had been recently trodden down. There were other marks too, in the thick dust close by, but, strangely enough, these were not footprints. It seemed as if some object about a foot wide had been dragged along from the gate into the lane. Long and earnestly the detectives searched over the spot while the others stood aside, but they found nothing to serve as a clue. It was, however, evident that the unfortunate girl had approached, on her return from Burghfield, and dismounting, had wheeled her cycle up to the gate and placed it there while she rested. Here she had undoubtedly been joined by someone—as the grass and weeds bore distinct traces of having been trodden upon by two different persons—and then, having remounted, she rode down beneath the railway bridge, and while ascending towards Stratfield Mortimer, had been foully shot.

The position in which both the body and the cycle were found pointed to the conclusion that she was riding her machine when fired at, but dismounting instantly she had staggered a few uneven steps, and then sank dying.

From the gateway the mark of the cycle could be traced with ease away towards Burghfield; indeed, a few yards from where the unknown person had apparently met her there were marks of her quick footsteps where she had dismounted. For fully a quarter of an hour the detectives searched both inside and outside the gate trying to distinguish accurately the footprints of the stranger whom she had met, and in this they were actively assisted by the village constable and George, all being careful not to tread upon the weeds and dust themselves. But to distinguish traces of footprints at night is exceedingly difficult; therefore they searched long and earnestly without any success, until at last something half-hidden in some long rank weeds caught George's eye.

"Why, what's this?" he cried, excitedly, as putting out his hand he drew forth a purely feminine object—an ordinary black hairpin.

The detectives, eager for anything which might lead to the discovery of the identity of the assassin, took it, examining it closely beneath the light of one of their bull's-eyes. It was a pin of a common kind, and what at first seemed like a clue was quickly discarded, for on taking it back to where the body was lying and taking one of the pins that held the unfortunate girl's wealth of fair hair, it was at once seen in comparison to be of the same thickness and make, although of a slightly different length.

Half a dozen pins were taken one by one from her hair and compared, but strangely enough all were about half an inch shorter than the one discovered by George.

"Anything in this, do you think?" one of the detectives asked the other, evidently his superior.

"No," the man answered promptly. "Women often use hairpins of different lengths. If you buy a box they are often of assorted sizes. No, that pin evidently fell from her hair when she put up her hands to tidy it, after dismounting."

So the vague theory that the person who joined her was a woman was dismissed. George had said nothing of his appointment with Liane at that spot, deeming it wiser to keep his secret, yet he was sorely puzzled by the fact that Nelly should have been there at the same hour that Liane had arranged to meet him. Perhaps his well-beloved had sent her with a message, as she had on previous occasions. If not, why had she returned from Burghfield by that lonely lane instead of riding direct along the high road, which was in so much better condition for cycling? He had only known her to ride along Cross Lane once before. Indeed, both she and Liane had always denounced that road with its flints and ruts as extremely injurious to cycles.

The assassin had got clean away without leaving the slightest trace. Even his footsteps were indistinguishable where all others were plainly marked, for during the day the dust had been blowing in clouds, carpeting the unfrequented lane to the depth of nearly half an inch, so that every imprint had been faithfully retained.

The detectives, after spending nearly two hours in futile search, were compelled at length to acknowledge themselves baffled, and preparations were made to acquaint Captain Brooker with the sad news, and to remove the body of Nelly Bridson to his house. At first it was suggested that George should go and break the sad tidings to the Captain, but he at once declined. He had never yet met Captain Brooker, and shrank from the unpleasantness of such a first interview with the man whose daughter he intended marrying. The duty therefore devolved upon the police, and the village constable was despatched with strict injunctions from George not to tell Miss Liane, but request to see the Captain himself alone. He knew what a blow it must prove to his well-beloved to thus lose under such terrible circumstances the fair-faced girl who had been her most intimate companion and confidante through so many years; therefore he endeavoured to spare her any unnecessary pain. Her father would, no doubt, break to her the sad truth best of all.

George thought it useless to seek her that night, therefore when the constable had left he took a long farewell glance at the white upturned face, and mounting, turned the mare's head towards the Court. Onward he rode in the darkness across the open country to Broomfield Hatch, then turning to the right into the Grazely Road, cantered down the hill towards the lodge gates of Stratfield Court.

"It's a strange affair," he muttered aloud. "Strange indeed, that Nelly should have ridden along that bad road if not with the intention of meeting someone by appointment. Yet she would scarcely make an appointment at that spot, knowing that I had arranged to meet Liane there. No, poor girl, I can't help feeling convinced that she was awaiting me to tell me of Liane's inability to be there. Again, how came she possessed of the missing miniature? What motive could anyone possibly have in murdering her? Ah! what motive, I wonder?"

Deep in thought, he allowed his mare to jog onward beneath the beeches which at that point nearly met overhead, rendering the road almost pitch dark. Once he thought he detected a slight movement in the impenetrable gloom, and pulling up, strained his eyes into the high bushes at the roadside. For a few moments he sat perfectly still in the saddle listening intently. Then, hearing nothing, he started forth again muttering:

"I could have sworn I saw something white fluttering over there; but bah! I'm unnerved, I suppose, to-night, and after all it was mere fancy."

Once he turned to glance back; then resolutely set his face along the dark avenue of chestnuts, homeward.

Little sleep came to his eyes that night. He was thinking of his own future, of Liane's love, and of her sad bereavement. Times without number he tried to formulate some theory to account for the miniature being in Nelly's possession, and the foul assassination of the bright, happy girl, whose merry laughter had so often charmed him. Yet it was a mystery, absolute and complete.

The great house was quiet, for its irascible master was dead, and its son, held in esteem by all the servants from butler to stable lad, was ruined. The very clocks seemed to tick with unaccustomed solemnity, and the bell in the turret over the stables chimed slowly and ominously as each long hour passed towards the dawn. At last, however,

still in his clothes, George slept, and it was not until the morning sun was streaming full into his room that he awoke. Then, finding that the two doctors had returned to London, he went to the library and wrote a brief note to Liane, asking her to meet him at the lodge gates at eleven o'clock. Sir John was now no more, therefore in the Park they might walk together unobserved. At first he hesitated to invite her there so quickly, but on reflection he saw that he must see her at once and endeavour to console her, and that the leafy glades of his dead father's domain were preferable to the highways, where they would probably be noticed by the village gossips.

At nine he sent the note down to the village by one of the stable lads, who brought back two hastily scribbled lines, and at the hour appointed she came slowly along the dusty road, looking cool and fresh beneath her white sunshade.

Their greeting was formal while within sight of the windows of the lodge, but presently, when they had entered the Park by the winding path which led through a thick copse, he halted, took her in his arms and imprinted upon her soft cheek a long passionate kiss. Her own full lips met his in a fierce affectionate caress, but their hearts were too full for words. They stood together in silence, locked in each other's arms.

Then he noticed for the first time that her eyes were swollen, and that she wore a white tulle veil to conceal their redness. She had no doubt spent the night in tears. The tiny gloved hand trembled in his grasp, and her lips quivered.

At last he spoke softly, first lifting her hand reverently to his lips.

"Both of us have experienced bereavement since last we met, two days ago, Liane. You have my sincerest sympathy, my darling."

"Is Sir John dead?" she inquired in a low husky voice.

He nodded.

"Then our losses are both hard to bear," she said, sighing. "Poor Nelly! I—I cannot bear to think of it. I cannot yet realise the terrible truth."

"Nor I, dearest," he answered, echoing her sigh. "But we must nevertheless face the facts if we desire to discover the assassin."

"They told me that it was you who first discovered her," she said falteringly, her eyes overflowing with tears. "Tell me how it all happened."

"There is very little to tell," he responded. "I found her lying on the road dead, and went at once for the doctor and the police."

"But what were you doing in Cross Lane?" she inquired.

"I went out to meet you as we had arranged."

"But surely you knew that I could not meet you," she exclaimed, looking at him quickly.

"How could I?"

"I sent you a letter telling you that my father had an unexpected visitor, and that we must therefore postpone our meeting until this evening."

"A letter!" he cried, puzzled. "I have only this moment left the Court, and no letter has yet arrived."

"But I gave it to Nelly to post before half-past twelve yesterday morning, therefore you should have received it at five. She must have forgotten to post it."

"Evidently," he said. "But have you yet ascertained why she went down Cross Lane? To the police the fact of her having ridden down there in preference to the high road is an enigma."

"No. According to the inquiries already made it has been ascertained that she went to Talmey's at Burghfield, purchased some silk, and had returned nearly to Stratfield Mortimer when she suddenly turned, went back about half a mile, and then entered Cross Lane. She was seen to turn by two labourers coming home from their work on Sim's Farm."

"She was alone, I suppose?"

"Entirely," Liane answered. "Like myself, she had no horror of tramps. I've ridden along these roads at all hours of the day and night, and have never been once molested."

"The tragedy was no doubt enacted in broad daylight, for the sun had not quite set when, according to the doctor, she must have been shot while riding. Have you any idea that she had incurred the animosity of anybody?"

"No; as you well know, she was of a most amicable disposition. As far as I am aware, she had not a single enemy in the world."

"A secret lover perhaps," George suggested.

"No, not that I am aware of. She had no secrets from me. Since we came to England she has never spoken of any man with admiration."

"Then abroad she had an admirer? Where?"

"In Nice. Charles Holroyde, a rich young Englishman, who was staying last winter at the Grand Hotel, admired her very much."

"And you were also living in Nice at the time?"

"Yes."

"Do you know his address in England?" he inquired.

"No. Nelly may have done, but I did not. I met him with her on the Promenade several times, and he seemed very pleasant and amusing. The diamond brooch she wore he gave her as a present last carnival."

"Now that I recollect," George exclaimed, "she was not wearing that brooch when I discovered her."

"No," answered his well-beloved. "Strangely enough, that has been stolen, although no attempt was made to take the watch and bunch of charms she wore in her blouse."

"Are the police aware of that?"

"Yes," Liane answered. "I told one of the detectives this morning, and gave him a minute description of the brooch. At the back are engraved Nelly's initials, together with his, therefore it is likely it may be traced."

"If so, it will be easy to find the murderer," George observed, as they strolled slowly along together beneath the welcome shade, for the morning was perfect, with bright warm sun and a cloudless sky into which the larks were everywhere soaring, filling the air with their shrill, joyous songs. "Have you any idea whether poor Nelly has corresponded with this man Holroyde since leaving Nice?" he inquired, after a pause.

"I think not."

"Why?"

"Well, they had a slight quarrel—I have never exactly known the cause—they parted, and although he wrote several times, she did not answer."

George scented suspicion in this circumstance. The fact that this brooch, one of considerable value, should alone have been stolen was, to say the least, curious; but discarded lovers sometimes avenge themselves, and this might perchance be a case of murder through jealousy. As he strolled on beside the handsome girl, with her pale, veiled face, he reflected deeply, trying in vain to form some theory as to the motive of the crime.

"Did the police tell you that beside her I discovered an old miniature of Lady Anne which has been missing from the Court for twenty years or more?" he asked.

"Yes, they showed it to my father and myself. We have, however, never seen it before. How it came into her possession we are utterly at a loss to imagine," she answered. "It is a heavy blow to lose her," she continued, in a low, intense voice. "We have always been as sisters, and now the fate that has overtaken her is enshrouded in a mystery which seems inexplicable. Father is dreadfully upset. I fear he will never be as happy as before."

"But you have me, Liane," her lover said, suddenly halting and drawing her towards him. "I love you, my darling. I told you nearly two months ago that I loved you. I don't know that I can add anything to what I said then."

She was silent, looking straight before her.

His breath came more quickly. The colour rose to his cheeks. At this decisive moment the words died in his throat, as they must for every honest lover who would fain ask the momentous question of her whom he loves. He remembered that he now had no right to ask her to be his wife.

"Do you know," he said at last, again grasping her hand impetuously, "that I think you the sweetest, most charming woman in the world? I want you to be my wife, and help me to make my life all it should be, only—only I dare not ask you."

Liane did not withdraw her fingers. She remained perfectly still without meeting his glance. Yet, strangely enough, she shuddered.

"I have not the power to say all I feel. My words sound so harsh and cold; but, Liane, Liane, I love you! God made not the heart of man to be silent, but has promised him eternity with the intention that he should not be alone. There is for me but one woman upon earth. It is you."

He looked imploringly into her face.

"Yes, George, I feel that you love me," she said, with a sweet smile behind her veil. "It is very nice to be loved."

He covered her hand with eager kisses; but she withdrew it softly, her lips compressed.

"My darling!" His arm was about her waist, and he kissed her lips. He spoke in strong suppressed agitation; his voice trembled. He recollected he was penniless.

She freed herself from his embrace. "No, no," she murmured. "We may love, but we must not marry. There are so

many other girls who would make you far happier than I should."

He went on to tell her how much he revered her character, how good and pure and lovely she was, and how completely she fulfilled his ideal of what a woman ought to be.

Slowly she shook her head. "That shows you know so little of me, George."

"I know only what you have told me, dearest," he answered.

Then a moment later he regretted that he had not adhered to his resolve and exercised more self-control. Was he not without means? Yet he had asked her to marry him! Could he tell her in the same breath that he was penniless? No, he dared not, lest she might cast him aside.

Liane stood like one in a dream, her beautiful face suffused by blushes, her eyes downcast, her breast slowly heaving.

He could resist his own passion—he could keep back what he felt—no longer.

"I love you!" cried he.

She stretched out her hands in a sort of mute appeal, and seemed as if she would fall; but in that instant she was again clasped to his heart, and held there with a tender force that she had neither the power nor the will to withstand.

He wished to marry her! Was it possible? And she loved him. With that thought her face was hidden on his shoulder, and she yielded herself to those protecting arms. He felt the shy loving movement as she nestled close to him, and her frame was shaken by a sob.

"My darling—my darling—my own darling!" he cried, triumph in his voice, and passionate joy in his eyes. "You love me—you love me!"

But again she drew herself away from him, then turned aside, held her breath, and shuddered. The lace ruffles on her bosom slowly rose and fell. The movement was as though she were shrinking from him with repulsion. But it was only momentary, and he did not notice it. Next instant she again turned, lifting her clear grey eyes to his with their frank innocent gaze.

"Yes," she said, almost in a whisper, "I love you."

Chapter Four.

Hairpins.

The tragedy caused the greatest excitement in the neighbourhood. Journalistic artists, those industrious gentlemen who produce such terribly distorted portraits, came from London and sketched the spot in Cross Lane and the exterior of Captain Brooker's house. One had the audacity to call and request him to lend them a photograph of the murdered girl. This he declined, with a few remarks more forcible than polite, for he had been greatly annoyed by the continual stream of interviewers, who continually rang his bell. Hundreds of persons walked or drove over from Reading to view the spot where Nelly had been found, and in addition to the local detectives, Inspector Swayne, a well-known officer from Scotland Yard, had been sent down to direct the inquiries.

At the inquest, held at the King's Head, two days later, it was expected by everybody that some interesting facts would be brought to light. Erle Brooker had never troubled to earn the good will of his neighbours, therefore they were now spitefully eager for any scandal that might be elicited, and long before the hour for which the jury had been summoned, congregated around the village inn. It was known that on the day following the tragedy the Captain had paid a mysterious visit to London, and the object of this trip had been a subject of much discussion everywhere. The murder of his adopted daughter had been a terrible blow to him, and when seen on his way to the station it was noticed that his face, usually smiling and good-humoured, wore a heavy, preoccupied look.

As he walked with Liane from his cottage to the inn, the crowd, gaping and hushed, opened a way for them to pass in; then, when they had entered, there was an outburst of sympathy and sneers, many of the latter reaching the ears of George Stratfield when, a few moments later, he followed them.

After a long wait, the Coroner at length took his seat, the jury were duly sworn, and the witnesses, ordered out of the crowded room, were ushered into a small ante-room, the table of which had recently been polished with stale beer. Here Liane introduced her lover to her father, and the men exchanged greetings. George, however, did not fail to notice the rustiness of the Captain's shabby frock-coat, nor the fact that his black trousers were shiny at the knees; yet as they grasped hands, the ring of genuine bonhomie about his voice favourably impressed him. By his tone and manner George instinctively knew that Erle Brooker, the man against whom his dead father entertained such an intense dislike, was a gentleman.

"Our meeting is in very tragic circumstances, Mr Stratfield," the Captain observed huskily, his grave face unusually pale. "They told me that you had discovered poor Nelly, but I had not the pleasure of your acquaintance, although I had, of course, heard of you often from the villagers."

Liane and George looked at one another significantly.

"I must regret your sad bereavement, and both you and Liane have my sincerest sympathy," the young man answered.

The Captain glanced quickly at the Baronet's son with a strange, puzzled expression. He had spoken of his daughter familiarly by her Christian name, and evidently knew her well. He had not before suspected this.

At that moment, however, the door opened, and a constable putting his head inside called his name. In obedience to the policeman's request he rose and followed him into the room wherein the court of inquiry had assembled. Having advanced to the table and been sworn, the Coroner addressing him, said,—

"Your name is Captain Erle Brooker, late of the Guards, I believe?"

"Yes."

"And you identify the body of the deceased. Who was she?"

"Helen Mary Bridson, daughter of a brother officer, Captain Bridson. She was left an orphan eleven years ago, and I brought her up."

"Did her father die in London?"

"No, on the Continent."

"Had she no relatives on her mother's side?"

The Captain slowly stroked his moustache, then answered.

"I knew of none."

"Were you acquainted with her mother?"

"No, I was not," he replied after a moment's reflection.

"And you have no suggestion to make, I suppose, regarding any person who might have entertained ill-will towards the unfortunate girl?" inquired the grey-haired Coroner.

"None whatever."

"When did you last see her alive?"

"On Monday evening, when she accompanied a visitor to the station to see him off on his return to London. She rode her cycle, and announced her intention of going on to Burghfield to make a purchase. She was found later on," he added, hoarsely.

"Who was this visitor? What was his name?"

"He was a friend, but I decline to give his name publicly," the Captain replied firmly. "I will, however, write it for your information, if you desire," and taking a pencil from his pocket he wrote the name of Prince Zertho d'Auzac and handed it to the Coroner.

The eager onlookers were disappointed. They had expected some sensational developments, but it seemed as though the crime was too enshrouded in mystery to prove of any very real interest. They did not, however, fail to notice that when the Coroner read what the Captain had written, an expression of astonishment crossed his face.

"Are you certain that the—this gentleman—left by the train he went to catch?" he asked.

"Quite," answered Brooker. "Not only have the police made inquiry at my instigation, but I have also accompanied a detective to London, where we found my visitor. Inspector Swayne, as a result of his investigations, was entirely satisfied."

"Had the unfortunate young lady any admirer?"

"I think not."

"Then you can tell us absolutely nothing further?" observed the Coroner, toying with his quill.

"Unfortunately I cannot."

The Captain, after signing his depositions, was directed to one of a row of empty chairs near the Coroner's table, and his daughter was called.

Liane, pale and nervous, neatly dressed in black, entered quietly, removed her right glove, and took the oath. Having given her name, the Coroner asked,—

"When did you last see the deceased, Miss Brooker?"

"When she set out to go to the railway station," she answered, in a low faltering voice.

"Have you any idea why she should have gone to Cross Lane? It was entirely out of her way home from Burghfield to

Stratfield Mortimer, was it not?"

"I cannot tell," Liane replied. "We went along that road on our cycles only on one occasion, and found it so rough that we agreed never to attempt it again."

"I presume, Miss Brooker, that the deceased was your most intimate friend?" observed the Coroner. "She would therefore be likely to tell you if she had a lover. Were you aware of the existence of any such person?"

"No," she replied, flushing slightly and glancing slowly around the hot, crowded room.

"You had a visitor whose name your father has just given me upon this paper," observed the Coroner. "Was that visitor known to the deceased?"

The eyes of the father and daughter met for a single instant as she glanced around upon the long lines of expectant countenances.

"Oh, yes," she replied. "The gentleman who came unexpectedly to see us has been known to us all for fully five or six years."

"And has always been very friendly towards the unfortunate girl?"

"Always."

"The only thing taken from the young lady appears to have been a diamond brooch. Do you know anything of it?"

"Of what?" gasped Liane nervously, her face paling almost imperceptibly behind her black veil.

"Of the brooch, of course."

"I only know that she prized it very much, as it was a present from a gentleman she had met while on the Riviera eighteen months ago."

"He was not her lover?" inquired the grave-faced man, without looking up from the sheet of blue foolscap whereon he was writing her statement.

"Not exactly. I have no knowledge of her possessing any admirer."

The Coroner at last paused and put down his quill. "And this miniature, which was discovered beside the body, have you ever before seen it in the possession of the deceased?" he asked, holding it up to her gaze.

"No," she answered. "Never."

The jury not desiring to ask any questions, Liane was then allowed to retire to a chair next her father, and the doctor was called.

"Will you kindly tell us the result of the *post mortem*, Dr Lewis?" the Coroner requested, when the medical man had been sworn.

At once the doctor explained in technical language the injuries he had discovered, and described the exact position in which he had found the body when he reached the spot.

"And what, in your opinion, was the cause of death?" asked the Coroner in dry, business-like tones.

"She was shot at close quarters while ascending the incline leading from the railway arch towards Stratfield Mortimer. The weapon used was an Army revolver. I produce the bullet I have extracted," he answered, taking it from his vest-pocket and handing it across the table. "The deceased's assailant stood on her left-hand side, and must have shot her as she rode along. She evidently mounted her cycle at the commencement of the incline, and having run down swiftly and passed beneath the arch, was again descending when the shot was fired."

"Was death instantaneous?" inquired the foreman of the jury.

"Scarcely," answered the doctor. "Such a wound must, however, cause death. Immediate attention could not have saved her."

A thrill of horror ran through the crowded court. Nearly everyone present had seen Nelly Bridson, with her smiling happy face, riding about the village and roads in the vicinity, and the knowledge that she had met with an end so terrible yet mysterious, appalled them.

Some further questions were put to the doctor, after which George Stratfield entered. As he raised the greasy copy of Holy Writ to his lips, his eyes fell upon Liane. She was sitting, pale and rigid, with a strange haggard expression upon her beautiful countenance such as he had never before beheld. He gazed upon her in alarm and surprise.

The Coroner's questions, however, compelled him to turn towards the jury, and in reply he explained how, on that fateful evening after his father's death, he was riding along Cross Lane, and was horrified by discovering the body of Nelly Bridson. In detail he described every incident, how he had lifted her up, and finding her quite dead, had ridden on into the village to obtain assistance.

Liane listened to his story open-mouthed. Her hands were closed tightly, and once or twice, when questions were put to him by Coroner or jury, she held her breath until he had answered. She was as one paralysed by some unknown

fear. Their gaze met more than once, and on each occasion he fancied he detected, even through her veil, that her eyes were dark and haggard, like one consumed by some terrible dread.

"You have, I believe, some knowledge of this miniature," the Coroner observed, again taking the small oval bejewelled portrait in his hand.

"Yes," he answered. "It is undoubtedly the one which has been missing from my late father's collection for more than twenty years. It was supposed to have been stolen, but by whom could never be ascertained. My father had several times offered handsome rewards for its recovery, as it is a family portrait."

"You have no idea, I suppose, by what means it could have come into the unfortunate girl's possession?"

"None whatever. The unexpected discovery amazed me."

"You have not told us what caused you to ride along Cross Lane on that evening," the foreman of the jury observed presently.

Again Liane held her breath.

"I had an appointment," he answered, not without considerable hesitation, "and was proceeding to keep it."

"Did you know Miss Bridson?"

"We had met on several occasions."

The detective from Scotland Yard bent across the table and uttered some words, after which the Coroner, addressing George, said,—

"Inspector Swayne desires to ascertain whether it was with the deceased you had an appointment?"

"No," he replied promptly.

Again the Coroner and the inspector exchanged some hurried words.

"Who was the person you intended to meet?" the Coroner asked, looking inquiringly at the witness.

"A lady."

"Am I right in presuming that it was Miss Brooker?"

George paused for an instant, bit his lip in displeasure at being thus compelled to publicly acknowledge his clandestine meetings with Liane, and then nodded in the affirmative.

"Then you were about to meet Miss Brooker, but instead, found Miss Bridson lying in the roadway dead?" the Coroner observed.

"I did."

"Are you aware that Miss Brooker wrote to you expressing her inability to keep the appointment?" the Coroner asked.

"She has told me so," he answered. "The letter was given, I believe, to the unfortunate young lady to post, but I have not received it."

"There appears to be some mystery about that letter," the Coroner said, turning to the jury. "I have it here. It was discovered in fragments yesterday by the police, thrown into a ditch at the roadside not far from where the body was found;" and taking from among his papers a sheet of foolscap whereon the pieces of Liane's letter had been pasted together, he handed it to the jury for their inspection.

At that instant a sudden thought occurred to George. This last fact pointed alone to one conclusion, namely, that Nelly being given the letter by Liane, and knowing its contents, kept the appointment herself, desiring to speak to him alone upon some subject the nature of which he could not, of course, guess. This would not only account for her presence at the spot where he found her, but also for her dismounting and resting at the gateway where they had discovered the curious marks in the dust, and for the fragments of the letter being recovered near.

A similar theory appeared to suggest itself to the minds of the jury, for a moment later the foreman asked—

"Would the deceased have any definite object in seeking an interview with you?"

"None whatever," he promptly replied, puzzled nevertheless that the remains of Liane's note should have been recovered in Cross Lane.

"You assisted the police to search the road for any traces of the assassin, I believe, Mr Stratfield," continued the Coroner. "Did you discover anything?"

George raised his eyes and met the curious gaze of the woman he loved. At that moment her veil failed to hide the strange look of dread and apprehension in her face, so intense it was. Her lips, slightly parted, quivered, the pallor of her cheeks was deathlike, and her whole attitude was that of one who feared the revelation of some terrible truth.

"During my search I discovered a lady's hairpin lying in the grass at the roadside," George replied, after a silence,

brief but complete. He was not thinking of the question, but was sorely puzzled at the extraordinary change in the woman who had promised to become his wife. The transformation was amazing.

"That pin is here," the Coroner explained to the jury, passing it across for their inspection. "I will call Henry Fawcett, hairdresser, of Reading, who will give evidence regarding it."

The man referred to was called in, and in reply to a formal question, took the hairpin in his hand, saying,—

"I have, at the instigation of the police, minutely compared this pin with those worn by the young lady at the time of her death, and also those found upon her dressing-table. I find that although apparently the same make it is nevertheless entirely different. Some of them found upon her dressing-table were of similar length and size, but while the pins she used were of the ordinary kind, such as may be purchased at any draper's, this one is of very superior quality. By the shape of its points, together with its curve, I can distinguish that this is the pin manufactured solely by Clark and Lister, of Birmingham, and sold by first-class hairdressers."

"Your theory is that this pin was never worn by the deceased?" the Coroner said, thoughtfully stroking his grey beard.

"I feel confident it never was, for the pin is quite new, and they are sold in large boxes," was the reply.

"In that case it seems probable that another woman was with her immediately before her death," observed the foreman to his brother jurors.

George looked again at Liane. Her eyes were still staring into space, her lips were trembling, her face was ashen pale. She started at the ominous words which fell upon her ear, then feigned to busy herself in re-buttoning the black glove she had removed before taking the oath.

"It, of course, remains for the police to prosecute further inquiries and to discover the owner of that hairpin," the Coroner said. "Most of us are aware that ladies frequently use various kinds of pins in dressing their hair, but in this case not a single one of the peculiar sort found on the spot was discovered in the deceased's possession; and this fact in itself certainly lends colour to a suggestion that immediately prior to the tragedy Miss Bridson was not alone."

George having concluded his evidence, had taken a seat beside his well-beloved. Only once she glanced at him, then evaded his gaze, for in her grey eyes was an expression as though she were still haunted by some unknown yet terrible dread. His statement regarding the hairpin had unnerved her. Did she, he wondered, wear similar pins in her own dark, deftly-coiled tresses?

Instantly, however, he laughed the wild, absurd idea to scorn. That she feared lest some startling truth should be elucidated was apparent; but the suspicion that a pin from her own hair had fallen unheeded upon the grass he dismissed as utterly preposterous. Was she not his enchantress? Surely he had no right to suspect her of all women, for he loved her with all his soul. Yet neither police, jury, nor he himself had inquired where she had been at the hour the tragedy was enacted. The thought held him appalled.

While these and similar reflections passed through his mind some words of the Coroner suddenly arrested his attention. The court was at once hushed in expectation, every word being listened to with eager attention.

"In the dress-pocket of the deceased has been found this letter, of a somewhat extraordinary character. As it is written in French it may be best if I read an English translation," he said, spreading out the missive before him. "It is on superior note-paper of English make, bears traces of having been written by an educated person, and was sent to the post office, Stratfield Mortimer, where the police have ascertained that the deceased called for it about ten days ago. No address is given, and the envelope is missing, but the communication is to the following effect:—'Dear Nelly, —The cord is now drawn so tight that it must snap ere long. England is safer than the south, no doubt, but it will not be so much longer. Therefore I remain here, but fortunately not "en convalescence." Do not tell Liane anything, but remember that the matter must be kept a profound secret, or one or other of us must pay the penalty. That would mean the end. For myself, I do not care, but for you it is, of course, entirely different. We are widely separated, yet our interests are entirely identical. Remember me, and be always on your guard against any surprise. Au revoir.' It will be noticed, gentlemen, by those of you who know French," the Coroner added, "that the words 'en convalescence' occur here in a rather curious sense. It is, in fact, nothing less than thieves' argot, meaning under police surveillance; and it is strange that it should be written by one who otherwise writes well and grammatically. The name of the dead girl's mysterious correspondent is a rather uncommon one—Mariette Lepage."

"Mariette Lepage!" George cried aloud in a tone of dismay, causing not a little consternation among those assembled.

The strange-sounding foreign name was only too deeply impressed upon his memory. The writer of that curious letter, with its well-guarded expression in the argot of the Paris slums, was the unknown woman to whom, under his father's will, he was compelled to offer marriage.

Chapter Five.

Captain Brooker's Objection.

As everyone expected, the Coroner's jury, after hearing Zertho's evidence at the adjourned inquest, returned the usual verdict of "Wilful murder against some person or persons unknown." It was the only conclusion possible in such a case, the mystery being left for the police to solve. Later that afternoon Inspector Swayne was closeted with George and Mr Harrison at Stratfield Court, and after an hour's consultation regarding the curious letter found in

Nelly's pocket, the detective left for London.

While that conversation was taking place Liane and her father, having returned from the inquest, were sitting together in the little dining-room. Brooker had cast off his shiny frock-coat with a sigh of genuine relief, assumed his old well-cut tweed jacket, easy and reminiscent of the past, while his daughter, having removed her gloves and veil, sat in the armchair by the fireplace still in her large black hat that gave a picturesque setting to her face. The windows were open, the blinds down, and the room, cool in the half-light, was filled with the sweet perfume of the wealth of old-world flowers outside.

"Our ill-luck seems to follow us, even now, my dear," he observed, thrusting his hands deep into his empty pockets and lazily stretching out his legs. "That inquisitive old chap, the Coroner, was within an ace of raking up all the past. I was afraid they intended to adjourn again."

"Why afraid?" asked Liane in surprise. "You surely do not fear anything?"

"Well, no, not exactly," her father answered, with a quick glance at her. "But some facts might have been then elicited which are best kept secret."

Liane looked at the Captain, long and steadily, with eyes full of sadness, then said, earnestly,—

"What caused you to suspect Zertho, father?"

"Suspect him. I never suspected him!"

"Do not deny the truth," she answered, in a tone of mild reproach. "I know that before you went to London you sent him a message which, had he been guilty, would have allowed him time to escape."

"But he was entirely unaware of the tragedy," her father answered, rolling a cigarette with infinite care. "Zertho could have had no object in murdering Nelly. Besides, it had already been proved by the station-master that he had left by the train he saw him enter."

"Then why did you take the trouble to go to London?" she inquired.

"My motive was a secret one," he replied.

"One that even I must not know?" she inquired, in genuine surprise.

"Yes, even you must not know, Liane," he answered. "Women are apt to grow confidential towards their lovers, and if the secret were once out, then my plans would be thwarted."

"You suspect someone?" she asked, in a low, harsh voice.

"Well," he answered, regarding his unlit cigarette intently, "I will not say that I actually suspect someone, but I have a theory, strange though it may be, which I believe will turn out to be the correct one."

Liane started. Father and daughter again exchanged quick glances. She fancied she saw suspicion in his eyes.

"May I not assist you?" she asked. "You know that in the past I've many times brought you luck at the tables."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "In this I must act entirely alone. George Stratfield no doubt occupies all your thoughts." She thought she detected a touch of sarcasm in his tone.

The girl blushed deeply, but did not answer. Her father, inveterate smoker that he was, lit his cigarette and sat silent and self-absorbed for a long time. He was thinking of the bright happy girl who, cold and dead in her tiny room upstairs, was the victim of a foul, terrible, and mysterious crime.

"How long have you known this man?" the Captain inquired at last.

"Three months."

"And has he proposed to you?"

"He has," she faltered, blushing more deeply.

He drew a long breath, rose slowly, and pulling aside the white blind, looked out as if in search of something. In truth, he was hesitating whether he should speak to her at once, or wait for some other opportunity. Turning to her at last, however, he said briefly, in a low, pained tone,—

"You must break off the engagement, Liane. You cannot marry him."

"Cannot!" she gasped, her face turning pale. "Why?"

"Listen," he continued huskily, coming closer to her, laying his big hand upon her shoulder, and looking down upon her tenderly. "Through all these years of prosperity and adversity you alone have been the one bright joy of my life. Your existence has kept me from going to the bad altogether; your influence has prevented me from sinking lower in degradation than I have already sunk. For me the facile pleasures of a stray man have ceased, because, for your sake, Liane, I gave up the old life and returned here to settle and become respectable. I admit that our life in England is a trifle tame after what we've been used to, but it will not, perhaps, be always so. At present my luck's against me and we must wait in patience; therefore do not accept the first man's offer of marriage. Life's merely a game of

rouge-et-noir. Sometimes you may win by waiting. Reflect well upon all the chances before you stake the maximum."

"But George loves me, dad, and his family are wealthy," she protested, meeting her father's earnest gaze with her large grey eyes, in which stood unshed tears.

"I don't doubt it, my girl," he answered huskily. "I was young once. I, too, thought I loved a woman—your mother. I foolishly believed that she loved me better than anyone on earth. Ah! You wring from me my confession, because—because it should serve you as a lesson." And he paused with bent head, while Liane held his strong but trembling hand. "It is a wretched story," he went on in a low, harsh voice, "yet you should know it, you who would bind yourself to this man irrevocably. At the time this woman came into my life I was on leave down in the South of France, with wealth, happiness and bright prospects. I loved her and made her my wife. Then I went with my regiment to India, but already my future was blasted, for within a year of my marriage the glamour fell from my eyes and I knew that I had been duped. A fault committed by her threw such opprobrium upon me that I was compelled to throw up my commission, leave her and go back to England. I could not return to my friends in London, because she would discover and annoy me; therefore I have drifted hither and thither, falling lower and lower in the social scale, until, ruined and without means, I became a common blackleg and swindler. But it belongs to the past. It is dead, gone—gone for ever. Those years have gone and my youth has gone. I've lived like other men since then. Heaven knows it has not been a life to boast of, Liane. There have been days and years in it when I dared not trust myself to remember what had been—days of madness and folly, and months of useless apathy. Ah!" he sighed, "I was straight enough before my marriage, but my life was wrecked solely by that woman."

His daughter listened intently, and when he had finished she echoed his deep sigh. Her father had never before told her the tragic story. She had always believed that her mother died of fever in India a year after marriage.

"Then my mother is not dead?" she observed reflectively.

"I do not know. To me she has been dead these eighteen years," he answered, with a stern look upon his hard-set features. A lump rose in his throat, and in his eye there was a suspicion of a tear.

"Was she like me?" Liane asked softly, still holding her father's hand and looking up at him.

"Yes, darling," he replied. "Sometimes when you look at me I shrink from you because your eyes are so like hers. She was just your age when I married her."

There was a long and painful silence. The hearts of father and daughter were too full for words. They were indeed an incongruous pair. He was a reckless gamester, a cunning adventurer, whose career had more than once brought him within an ace of arrest, while she, although prematurely versed in the evil ways of a polyglot world, where the laws of rectitude and morality were lax, was nevertheless pure, honest and good.

"But, dear old dad, why may I not marry George?" she asked when, after thinking deeply over the truth regarding her parentage, her mind reverted to thoughts of the man she loved.

"I cannot sufficiently explain the reason now," he answered vaguely. "Some day, when I am aware of all the facts, you shall know."

"But I can love no other man," she exclaimed decisively, with eyes downcast.

"You know my wish, Liane," her father answered rather coldly. "I feel sure you will endeavour to respect it."

"I cannot, father! I really cannot!" she cried starting up. "Besides, you give me no reason why I should not marry."

"I am unable to explain facts of which I am as yet unaware," he said, withdrawing his hand.

"We love each other, therefore I cannot see why you should object."

"I do not doubt that there is affection between you, but my objection is well based, I assure you, as some day you will be convinced."

"Have you any antipathy against George personally?"

"None whatever; I rather like him," he said. "I only tell you in plain, straightforward terms that your marriage with him is impossible, therefore the sooner you part the better;" and opening the door, he slowly left the room.

Deep in thought, Liane stood leaning against the table, in the same position as Zertho had stood when he had asked the captain for her hand. Evidently her father entertained some deep-rooted prejudice against the Stratfields; nevertheless, after calm reflection, she felt confident that sooner or later she could over-rule his objection, and persuade him to adopt her view, as she had done on previous occasions without number.

On the following afternoon a double funeral attracted hundreds of persons to the churchyard of Stratfield Mortimer, where Nelly Bridson was laid to rest in a plain grave, beneath a drooping willow, and the body of Sir John Stratfield, fourteenth baronet, was placed in the family vault, among his ancestors. When the interments were over, George met Liane and managed to whisper a few words to her. It was an appointment, and in accordance with his request, she went at sundown along the chestnut avenue to the Court, and was at once shown to the library, where her lover awaited her.

Her mourning became her well. His quick eyes detected that her black dress, though not new, bore the unmistakable cut of the fashionable dressmaker. Her figure, perfect in symmetry, was shown to advantage by her short, French corset, and the narrow band of black satin that begirt her slim waist.

"I have to offer my apologies to you, dearest," he said, when the servant had closed the door. "At the inquest I was bound to openly confess that we had met clandestinely."

"What apology is needed?" she asked, smiling. "We love each other, and care nothing for what the world may think."

"That is true," he answered, deep in thought. "But I—I have an announcement to make to you, which I fear must cause you pain."

"An announcement! What?"

"I must leave you."

She stood before him, looked quickly into his face, and turned pale.

"Leave me!" she gasped.

"Yes. I find, alas, I am compelled to go."

"And only the day before yesterday you asked me to become your wife!" she cried, reproachfully. "What have I done that you should treat me thus?"

"Nothing. You have done nothing, Liane, only to fascinate me and hold me irrevocably to you," he answered, looking earnestly into her clear, beautiful eyes. He paused. His soul was too full for utterance. Then at length he said, "I have asked you here this evening to tell you everything, for when I leave here, I fear it will be never to return."

"Why?" she asked, looking him full in the face, with a puzzled expression.

"Because I am not wealthy, as is generally believed," he replied, colouring deeply as he met her searching gaze. "It is useless to deceive you, therefore I must tell you the hideous truth. My father has thought fit to leave his whole fortune to my brother, and allow me to go penniless. I am therefore unable to marry."

Liane's lips had grown white with fear and astonishment. "And that is the reason you now intend to forsake me!" she gasped.

He bowed his head.

She passed her hand over her eyes. Her soul was in a tumult. She, too, fondly wished to believe that he actually loved her, to trust the evidence of what she saw. His words were a trifle ambiguous, and that was sufficient to fill her with uncertainty. Jealous of that delicacy which is the parent of love, and its best preserver, she checked the overflowings of her heart, and while her face streamed with tears, placed her hand protestingly upon his arm.

"Forgive me!" he cried with increased earnestness. "I know I have wronged you. Forgive me, in justice to your own virtues, Liane. In what has passed between us I feel I ought to have only expressed thanks for your goodness to me; but if my words or manner have obeyed the more fervid impulse of my soul, and declared aloud what should have been kept secret, blame my nature, not my presumption. I am ruined, and I dare not look steadily on any aim higher than your esteem."

"Ah! do not speak to me so coldly," the girl burst forth passionately. "I cannot bear it. You said you loved me," and she sobbed bitterly.

"I have loved you, dear one, ever since we first met," he answered quickly. "I love you now, even better than my life. But alas! a mysterious fate seems to govern both of us, and we are compelled to part."

"To part!" she wailed. "Why?"

"Ere long my brother will come to take possession of this place, for it is no longer my home," he answered, in a low, pained tone. "I shall go away to London and try to eke out a living at the Bar. For a young man without means the legal profession is but a poor one at best," he sighed; "therefore marriage being out of the question, I am compelled to tell you the plain honest truth, and release you."

"Release me!" she echoed wildly. "I do not desire release. I love you, George."

"But you do not love me sufficiently to wait through the long, dark days that are at hand?" he cried, surprised at her passionate declaration! "Remember, I am penniless, without hope, without prospects, without anything save my great affection for you!"

The slanting rays of the sunset streaming through the stained glass fell upon her, gilded her hair, and illumined her anxious face with a halo of light. She looked lovely, with her dark eyelashes trembling, her soft eyes full of love, and the colour of clear sunrise mounting on her cheeks and brow.

"Wealthy or poor," she answered, in a low, sweet tone, "it matters not, because I love you, George."

"And although we must part; although I must go to London and exchange this free, open, happy life with you daily beside me for the dusty dinginess of chambers wherein the sun never penetrates, yet you will still remain mine?" he cried half doubtingly. "Do you really mean it, Liane?"

"I do," she answered, in a voice trembling with emotion, and with a look all tenderness and benignity. "It is no fault of yours that you are poor, therefore be of stout heart, and when you return to London remember that one woman alone thinks ever of you, because—because she loves you."

With the large tears in her beautiful eyes—tears which seemed to him to rise partly from her desire to love him with the power of his love—she put her pure, bright lips, half-smiling, half-prone to reply to tears, against his brow, lined with doubt and eager longing.

“Dearest darling, love of my life,” he whispered through her clouds of soft, silky hair. “I know I, an Englishman, with my blunt manners, must grate upon you sometimes, with your delicate, high-strung feelings. We are as different as the day is from the night. But, Liane, if truth and honesty, and a will so to use my life as to become one of the real workers and helpers in the world—a wish to be manly and upright, strong of heart, and clean of conscience before God and man—if these can atone for lack of culture and refinement, then I hope you will not find me wanting. When I am absent there will be plenty besides me to love you, but I will not believe that any can love you better than I do, or few as truly.”

She hesitated for a single instant as he spoke. She lifted her face from her hands and looked up at him. He was not much taller than she; it was not far. But as she looked another face came between them—a pale, refined face: a face with more poetry, more romance, more passion.

Its sight was to her as a spectre of the past. It held her dumb in terror and dismay.

George saw her hesitation, and the strange horrified look in her eyes. Puzzled, he uttered not a word, but watched her breathlessly.

Liane opened her pale lips, but they closed and tightened upon each other; from beneath her narrowed brows her eyes sent short flashes out upon his, and her breath came and went long and deep, without sound.

“Why are you silent?” he whispered at last.

Her lips relaxed, her form drooped, she lifted her face to reply, but her mouth twitched; she could not speak.

“If you truly love me and are prepared to wait, I will do my best,” he declared passionately, surprised at her change of manner, but little dreaming of its cause.

Suddenly, however, as quickly as the heavy, preoccupied expression had settled upon her countenance it was succeeded by a smile. She was a strange, unique, incomparable girl, for the next second she laughed at him in sweetest manner with a come and go of glances, saying in a tone of low, deep tenderness,—

“Yes, George, you are the only man I love. If it is necessary that you should go to follow your profession, then go, and take with you the blessing of the woman who has promised to become your wife.”

An instant later George held her slight graceful form in fond embrace, while she hid her forehead and wet eyelashes on his shoulder, murmuring,—

“I shall be yours always.”

His burning kisses fell upon her hair, but neither of them spoke for a while. The sunlight faded, and the old brown room with its shelves of dusty tomes became dark and gloomy. Each felt the other’s heart beat; and the unlucky son of the Stratfields drank that ecstasy of silent, delicious bliss which comes to great hearts only once in a life.

Later that night, after he had walked with her to her father’s door, she went to her room and sat alone for a long time in silence. A noise aroused her. It was her father retiring to rest. She listened intently, until, hearing his door closed, she paced her room with fevered steps. Her face was ashen pale, and from time to time low, strange words escaped her, as, lifting her hands, she pushed back her hair, which seemed to press too heavily upon her hot brow.

“I love him!” she gasped in a low, strained whisper. “Yet, if he only knew—if he only knew!”

And she shuddered.

Thrice she moved slowly backwards and forwards across her room. Suddenly pulling aside the dimity curtains, she gazed out into the brilliant night. The moon was shining full upon her windows, revealing the trees and stretch of undulating meadows beyond.

For an instant she hesitated. Her clenched hands trembled; she held her breath, listening. Reassured, she crossed noiselessly to her little dressing-table, opened one of the drawers, and took therefrom a small jewel-case. Only a few cheap trinkets were revealed when she unlocked it, but from it she drew forth a small oblong box of white cardboard. Then cautiously she crept from her room downstairs, and out into the small orchard behind the house. Crossing it, still in the deep shadow of the apple trees, she searched for some moments until she found a spade, and making her way to a bed that had been newly dug, she deftly removed several shovelfuls of earth, panting the while.

Taking the small box hastily from her pocket, she glanced round to assure herself she was unobserved, then bent, and placing it carefully in the hole she had made, an instant later proceeded to fill it in and rearrange the surface, so that no trace should remain of it having been removed.

Then replacing the spade where she had found it, she crept noiselessly back to her room, locked the door and stood rigid, her hand pressed upon her wildly-beating heart.

Outsiders.

Many weeks went by. To Liane the days were long, weary and monotonous, for George had left, and the Court had passed into the possession of Major Stratfield, a proud, pompous, red-faced man, who often rode through the village, but spoke to nobody. Since her lover had gone she had remained dull and apathetic, taking scarcely any interest in anything, and never riding her cycle because of the tragic memories its sight always aroused within her. Her life was, indeed, grey and colourless, for she noticed that of late even her father's manner had changed strangely towards her, and instead of being uniformly courteous and solicitous regarding her welfare, he now seemed to treat her with studied indifference, and she even thought she detected within him a kind of repulsion, as if her presence annoyed and distressed him.

He had never been the same towards her since that memorable evening when he had forbidden her to accept George's offer. Yet her mind was full of thoughts of her absent lover, and she sent him by post boxes of flowers from the garden, that their sweet perfume should remind him of her.

Another fact also caused her most intense anxiety and apprehension. The secret which she believed locked securely within her own bosom was undoubtedly in possession of some unknown person, for having gone into the garden one morning, a week after that night when she had buried the small box from her jewel-case, she fancied that the ground had been freshly disturbed, and that someone had searched the spot.

If so, her actions had been watched.

Thus she lived from day to day, filled by a constant dread that gripped her heart and paralysed her senses. She knew that the most expert officers from Scotland Yard were actively endeavouring to discover the identity of Nelly's assassin, and was convinced that sooner or later the terrible truth must be elicited.

Twice each week George wrote to her, and she read and re-read his letters many times, sending him in return all the gossip of the old-world village that he loved so well. Thanks to the generosity of the Major, who had decided to give him a small property bringing in some two hundred a year, he was not so badly off as he had anticipated; nevertheless, were it not for that he must have been in serious straits, for, according to his letters, work at the Bar was absolutely unobtainable, and for a whole month he had been without a single brief. Old Mr Harrison sometimes gave him one, but beyond that he could pick up scarcely anything.

One evening in late autumn, when the air was damp and chilly, the orchard covered with leaves and the walnuts were rattling down upon the out-house roof with every gust of wind that blew across the hills, the Captain received a telegram, and briefly observed that it was necessary he should go to London on the morrow. He threw the piece of pink paper into the fire without saying who was the sender, and next morning rose an hour earlier and caught the train to Paddington, whence he drove in a hansom to an address in Cork Street, Piccadilly.

A man-servant admitted him, and he was at once ushered upstairs to a small, well-furnished drawing-room, which, however, still retained the odour of overnight cigars. He had scarcely time to fling himself into a chair when a door on the opposite side of the room opened, and Zertho entered, well-dressed, gay and smiling, with a carnation in the lappel of his coat.

"Well, Brooker, old chap," he cried, extending his white hand heartily, "I'm back again, you see."

"Yes," answered the other, smiling and grasping the proffered hand. "The dignity of Prince appears to suit you, judging from your healthful look."

"It does, Brooker; it does," he answered laughing. "One takes more interest in life when one has a plentiful supply of the needful than when one has to depend upon Fortune for a dinner."

"I wonder that no one has yet spotted you," Brooker observed, leaning back in the silken armchair, stretching out his feet upon the hearthrug, regarding the Prince with a critical look from head to toe, and lighting the cigar the other had offered him.

"If they did, it might certainly be a bit awkward," Zertho acquiesced. "But many people are ready to forgive the little peccadilloes of anybody with a title."

"Ah! that's so. It's money, money always," the luckless gamester observed with a sigh.

"Well, hang it, you can't grumble. You've won and lost a bit in your time," his friend said, casting himself upon a couch near, stroking his dark beard, and blowing a cloud of smoke from his full lips. "If you're such an idiot as not to play any more, well you, of course, have to suffer."

"Play, be hanged!" cried Brooker, impetuously. "My luck's gone. The last time I played trente-et-quarante, I lost a couple of ponies."

"But the system is—"

"Oh, the system is all rot. The Johnnie who invented it ought to have gone and played it himself. He'd have been a candidate for the nearest workhouse within three days."

"Well, we brought it off all right more than once," Zertho observed, with a slight accent.

"Mere flukes, all of them."

"You won at one coup thirty-six thousand francs, I remember. Surely that wasn't bad?"

"Ah! that was because Liane was sitting beside me. It's wonderful what luck that girl has."

"Then why not take her back again this season?" his companion suggested.

"She wouldn't go," he answered, after a slight pause.

"Wouldn't go!" cried the Prince, raising his dark, well-defined brows. "You are her father. Surely she obeys you?"

"Of late she's very wilful; different entirely from the child as you knew her. Since poor Nelly's death she seems to have been seized with a sudden desire to go to church on Sunday, and is getting altogether a bluestocking," the Captain said.

"Poor Nelly!" sighed the Prince. "I have never ceased to think of that sad evening when she grasped my hand through the carriage-window as the train was moving, and with a merry mischievous laugh waved me farewell. She was bright and happy then, as she always was; yet an hour later she was shot dead by some villainous hand. I wonder whether the mystery will ever be explained," he added, reflectively.

The Captain made no reply, but smoked on steadily, his head thrown back, gazing fixedly at the opposite wall.

"The police have done their best," he answered at length. "At present, however, they have no clue."

"And I don't believe they ever will have," answered Zertho, slowly.

"What makes you think that?" Brooker inquired, turning and looking at him.

"Well, I've read all that the papers say about the affair," he answered, "and to me the mystery seems at present one that may never be solved."

"Unless the crime is brought home to the assassin by some unexpected means."

"Of course, of course," he answered. "You're a confounded fool to remain down in that wretched, dismal hole, Brooker. How you can stand it after what you've been used to I really can't think."

"My dear fellow, I've grown quite bucolic," he assured his companion, laughing a trifle bitterly. "The few pounds I've still got suffice to keep up the half-pay wheeze, and although I'm in a chronic state of hard-up, yet I manage to rub along somehow and just pay the butcher and baker. Hang it! Why, I'm so infernally respectable that a chap came round last week with a yellow paper on which he wanted me to declare my income. Fancy me paying an income-tax!"

The Prince laughed at his friend's grim humour. In the old days at Monte Carlo, Erle Brooker had been full of fun. He was the life and soul of the Hôtel de Paris. No reverse ever struck him seriously, for he would laugh when "broke" just as heartily as when, with pockets bulky with greasy banknotes, he would descend the steps from the Casino, and crack a bottle of "fizz" at the café opposite.

"If I were you I'd declare my income at eight hundred a year, pay up, and look big," Zertho laughed. "It would inspire confidence, and you could get a bit of credit here and there. Then when that's exhausted, clear out."

"The old game, eh? No, I'm straight now," the other answered, his face suddenly growing grave.

"Honesty is starvation. That used to be our motto, didn't it? Yet here you are with only just enough to keep a roof over your head, living in a dreary out-of-the-way hole, and posing as the model father. The thing's too absurd."

"I don't see it. Surely I can please myself?"

"Of course. But is it just to Liane?"

"What do you mean?"

"It is essential for a young girl of her temperament to have life and gaiety," he said, exhibiting his palms with a quick, expressive movement. "By vegetating in Stratfield Mortimer, amid surroundings which must necessarily possess exceedingly painful memories, she will soon become prematurely old. It's nothing short of an infernal shame that she should be allowed to remain there."

Brooker did not reply. He had on more than one occasion lately reflected that a change of surroundings would do her good, for he had noticed with no little alarm how highly strung had been her nerves of late, and how pale and wan were her cheeks. Zertho spoke the truth.

"I don't deny that what you say is correct," he replied thoughtfully. "But what's the use of talking of gaiety? How can any one have life without either money or friends?"

"Easily enough. Both you and Liane know the Riviera well enough to find plenty of amusement there."

"No, she wouldn't go. She hates it."

"Bah!" cried the prince, impatiently. "If, as you say, she's turned a bit religious, she of course regards the old life as altogether dreadful. But you can easily overcome those prejudices—or I will."

"How?"

"In December I'm going to Nice for the season," Zertho explained. "We shall have plenty of fun there, so at my

expense you'll come."

"I think not," was the brief reply.

"My dear fellow, why not," he cried. "Surely you can have no qualms about accepting my hospitality. You will remember that when I was laid up with typhoid in Ostend I lived for months on your generosity. And heaven knows, you had then but little to spare! It is my intention now to recompense you."

"And to endeavour to win Liane's love," added the Captain, curtly.

Zertho's brows narrowed slightly. He paused, gazing at the fine diamond glittering upon his white finger.

"Well, yes," he answered at last. "I don't see why there should be anything underhand between us."

"I gave you my answer when you came down to Stratfield Mortimer," the other responded in a harsh, dry tone, rising slowly. "I still adhere to my decision."

"Why?" protested his whilom partner, looking up at him intently, and sticking his hands into his pockets in lazy, indolent attitude.

"Because I'm confident she will never marry you."

"Has she a lover?"

His companion gave an affirmative nod. Zertho frowned and bit his lip.

"Who is he?" he asked. "Some uncouth countryman or other, I'll be bound."

"The son of Sir John Stratfield."

The prince sprang to his feet, and faced his visitor with a look of amazement.

"Sir John's son! Never!" he gasped.

"Yes. Strange how such unexpected events occur, isn't it?" Brooker observed, slowly, with emphasis.

"But, my dear fellow, you can't allow it. You must not!" he cried wildly.

"I've already told her that marriage is entirely out of the question. Yet she will not heed me," her father observed, twirling the moustaches which he kept as well trained now as in the days when he rode at the head of his troop on Hounslow Heath, and was the pet of certain London drawing-rooms.

"Then take her abroad, so that they cannot meet. Come to Nice in December."

"I am to bring her, so that you may endeavour to take George Stratfield's place in her heart—eh?" observed the Captain shrewdly.

"Marriage with George Stratfield is agreed between us both to be impossible, whereas marriage with me is not improbable," was the reply.

Erle Brooker shrugged his shoulders as he again puffed vigorously at his cigar. He now saw plainly Zertho's object in asking him to call.

"Well," continued his friend, "even I, with all my faults, am preferable to any Stratfield as Liane's husband, am I not?"

"I don't see why we need discuss it further," said Brooker quietly. "Liane will never become Princess d'Auzac."

"Will you allow me to pay my attentions to her?"

"If you are together I cannot prevent it, Zertho. But, candidly speaking, you are not the man I would choose as husband for my daughter."

"I know I'm not, old fellow," the other said, shrugging his shoulders slightly. "And you're not exactly the man that, in ordinary circumstances, I'd choose as my father-in-law. But I have money, and if the man's a bit decent-looking, and sound of wind and limb, it's about all a woman wants nowadays."

"Ah! I don't think you yet understand Liane. She's not eager for money and position, like most girls."

"Well, let me have a fair innings, Brooker, and she'll consent to become Princess d'Auzac, I feel convinced. You fancy I only admire her; but I swear it's a bit more than mere admiration. For Heaven's sake take her out of that dismal hole where you are living, and make her break it all off with Stratfield's son. She must do that at once. Take her to the seaside—to Paris—anywhere, for a month or two until we can all meet in the South."

Brooker, leaning against the mantelshelf, slowly flicked the ash from his cigar, meditated deeply for a few moments, then asked—

"Why do you wish to take me back to the old spot?"

"Because only there can you pick up a living. The police have nothing against either of us, so what have we to fear?"

"Recognition by one or other of our dupes. Play wasn't all straight, you'll remember."

"Bah!" cried Zertho with impatience. "What's the use of meeting trouble half-way? You never used to have a thought for the morrow in the old days. But, there, you're respectable now," he added, with a slight sneer.

"If I go South I shall not play," Brooker said, decisively. "I've given it up."

"Because you've had a long run of ill-luck—eh?" the other laughed. "Surely this is the first time you've adopted such a course. I might have been in the same unenviable plight as yourself by now if my respected parent had not taken it into his head to drop out of this sick hurry of life just at a moment when my funds were exhausted. One day I was an adventurer with a light heart and much lighter pocket, and on the next wealthy beyond my wildest expectations. Such is one's fortune. Even your bad luck may have changed during these months."

"I think not," Brooker answered gravely.

"Well, you shall have a thousand on loan to venture again," his old partner said good-naturedly.

"I appreciate your kindness, Zertho," he answered, in a low tone, smiling sadly, "but my days are over. I've lost, and gone under."

The prince glanced at him for an instant. There was a strange glint in his dark eyes.

"As you wish," he answered, then walking to a small rosewood escritoire which stood in the window, he sat down and scribbled a cheque, payable to his friend for five hundred pounds. Brooker, still smoking, watched him in silence, unaware of his intention. Slowly the prince blotted it, folded it, and placing it in an envelope, returned to where his visitor was standing.

"I asked you to take Liane from all the painful memories of Stratfield Mortimer. Do so for her sake, and accept this as some slight contribution towards the expense. Only don't let her know that it comes from me."

Brooker took the envelope mechanically, regarding his friend steadily, with fixed gaze. At first there was indecision in his countenance, but next instant his face went white with fierce anger and resentment. His hand closed convulsively upon the envelope, crushing it into a shapeless mass, and with a fierce imprecation he cast it from him upon the floor.

"No, I'll never touch your money!" he cried, with a gesture, as if shrinking from its contact. "You fear lest Liane should know that you are attempting to buy her just as you would some chattel or other which, for the moment, takes your fancy. But she shall know; and she shall never be your wife."

"Very well," answered Zertho, with a contemptuous smile, facing the Captain quickly. "Act as you please, but I tell you plainly, once and for all, that Liane will marry me."

"She shall not."

"She shall!" declared the other, determinedly, looking into his face intently, his black eyes flashing. "And you will use that cheque for her benefit, and in the manner I direct, without telling her anything. You will also bring her to Nice, and stand aside that I may win her, and—"

"I'll do nothing of the sort. I'd rather see her dead."

Zertho's fingers twitched, as was his habit when excited. Upon his dark sallow face was an expression of cruel, relentless revenge; an evil look which his companion had only seen once before.

"Listen, Brooker," he exclaimed in a low, harsh tone, as advancing close to him he bent and uttered some rapid words in his ear, so low that none might hear them save himself.

"Good God! Zertho!" cried the unhappy man, turning white to the lips, and glaring at him. "Surely you don't intend to give me away?" he gasped, in a hoarse, terrified whisper.

"I do," was the firm reply. "My silence is only in exchange for your assistance. Now you thoroughly understand."

"Then you want Liane, my child, as the price of my secret! My God!" he groaned, in a husky, broken voice, sinking back into his chair in an attitude of abject dejection, covering his blanched, haggard face with trembling hands.

Chapter Seven.

The Missing Mariette.

In London the January afternoon was wet and cheerless. Alone in his dingy chambers on the third floor of an ancient smoke-begrimed house in Clifford's Inn, one of the old bits of New Babylon now sadly fallen from its once distinguished estate, George Stratfield sat gazing moodily into the fire. In his hand was a letter he had just received from Liane; a strange letter which caused him to ponder deeply, and vaguely wonder, whether after all he had not acted unwisely in sacrificing his fortune for her sake.

She had been nearly three months abroad, and although she had written weekly there was an increasing coldness about her letters which sorely puzzled him. Twice only had they met since he left the Court—on the two evenings she and her father had spent in London on their way to the Continent. He often looked back upon those hours,

remembering every tender word she had uttered, and recalling the unmistakable light of love that lit up her face when he was nigh. Yet since she had been *en séjour* on the Riviera her letters were no longer long and gossipy, but brief, hurriedly-written scribbles which bore evidence that she wrote more for the fulfilment of her promise than from a desire to tell of her daily doings, as lovers will.

A dozen times he had read and re-read the letter, then lifting his eyes from it his gaze wandered around the shabby room with its ragged leather chairs, its carpet so faded that the original pattern had been lost, its two well-filled bookcases which had stood there and been used by various tenants for close upon a century, its panelled walls painted a dull drab, and its deep-set windows grimy with the soot of London. The two rooms which comprised this bachelor abode were decidedly depressing even on the brightest day, for the view from the windows was upon a small paved court, beyond which stood the small ancient Hall, the same in which Sir Matthew Hale and the seventeen judges sat after the Great Fire in 1666, to adjudicate on the claims of landlords and tenants of burned houses, so as to prevent lawsuits. An ocean of chimneys belched around, while inside the furniture had seen its best days fully twenty years before, and the tablecloth of faded green was full of brown holes burnt by some previous resident who had evidently been a careless cigarette smoker.

George drew his hand wearily across his brow, sighed, replaced the letter slowly in its envelope, examined the post-mark, then placed it in his pocket.

"No," he said aloud, "I won't believe it. She said she loved me, and she loves me still."

And he poked the fire vigorously until it blazed and threw a welcome light over the gloomy, dismal room.

Suddenly a loud rapping sounded on the outer door, and rising unwillingly, expecting it to be one of his many friends of the "briefless brigade," he went and opened it, confronting to his surprise his father's solicitor, Harrison.

"Well, George," exclaimed his visitor, thrusting his wet umbrella into the stand in the tiny cupboard-like space which served as hall, and walking on uninvited into the apartment which served as office and sitting-room. "Alone I see. I'm glad, for I want ten minutes' chat with you."

"At your service, Harrison," Stratfield answered, in expectation of a five-guinea brief. "What is it? Something for opinion?"

"Yes," answered the elder man, taking a chair. "It is for opinion, but it concerns yourself."

George flung himself into the armchair from which he had just risen, placed his feet upon the fender and his hands at the back of his head, as was his habit when desiring to listen attentively.

"Well," he said, sighing, "about that absurd provision of the old man's will, I suppose? I'm comfortable enough, so what's the use of worrying over it?"

"But it is necessary. You see, I'm bound to try and find this woman," the other answered, taking from his pocket some blue foolscap whereon were some memoranda. "Besides, the first stage of the inquiry is complete."

"And what have you discovered?" he asked eagerly. "I placed the matter in the hands of Rutter, the private inquiry agent, whose report I have here," answered the solicitor. "It states that no such person as Madame Lepage is living at 89 Rue Toullier, Paris, but the concierge remembers that an elderly lady, believed to be a widow, once occupied with her daughter a flat on the fourth floor. The man, however forgets their name, as they only resided there a few months. During that time the daughter, whom he describes as young and of prepossessing appearance, mysteriously disappeared, and although a search was instituted, she was never found. There was no suspicion of suicide or foul play, but the police at the time inclined to the belief that, possessing a voice above the average, she had, like so many other girls who tire of the monotony of home life, forsaken it and obtained an engagement at some obscure café-concert under an assumed name. Rutter, following up this theory, then visited all the impressarios he could find in an endeavour to discover an artist whose real name was Lepage. But from the first this search was foredoomed to failure, for girls who desire to exchange home life for the stage seldom give their impressarios their correct names, hence no such person as Mariette Lepage could be traced."

"Then, after all, we are as far off discovering who this mysterious woman is as we ever were," George observed, glancing at his visitor with a half-amused smile.

"Well, not exactly," the solicitor answered. "Undoubtedly the girl who disappeared from the house in the Rue Toullier was the woman for whom we are searching."

"The letter found on Nelly Bridson is sufficient proof that she's still alive," said the younger man.

"Exactly; and from its tone it would appear that she is in the lower strata of society," Harrison remarked.

"Whoever she is I shall, I suppose, be required to offer her marriage, even if she's a hideous old hag! My father was certainly determined that I should be sufficiently punished for my refusal to comply with his desire," George observed, smiling bitterly.

"Why regret the past?" Harrison asked slowly, referring again to the blue foolscap by the fitful light of the fire. "The inquiry has, up to the present, resulted in the elucidation of only one definite fact; nevertheless, Rutter is certainly on the right scent, and as he is now extensively advertising in the principal papers throughout France, I hope to be able ere long to report something more satisfactory."

"It will be no satisfaction whatever to me if she is found," observed the young man, grimly.

"But it is imperative that the matter should be cleared up," the solicitor protested. "When we have discovered her you will, of course, be at liberty to offer her marriage, or not, just as you please."

"It is a most remarkable phase of the affair that the only person acquainted with this mysterious woman was poor Nelly," the young barrister exclaimed at last. "You will remember that in the letter, with its slang of the slums, Liane's name was mentioned. Well, I have written asking her whether she is acquainted with any woman of the same name with which the curious letter is signed, but she has replied saying that neither herself nor her father ever knew any such person, and they had been quite at a loss to know how Nelly should have become acquainted with her. Here is her reply; read for yourself," and from his pocket he took several letters, and selecting one, handed it to the keen-faced, grey-haired man, at the same time striking a vesta and lighting the lamp standing upon the table.

"You don't seem to mind other people reading your love-letters," the old solicitor said, laughing and turning towards the light. "When I was young I kept them tied up with pink tape in a box carefully locked."

George smiled. "The pink tape was owing to the legal instinct, I suppose," he said. Then he added, with a slight touch of sorrow, "There are not many secrets in Liane's letters."

The shrewd old man detected disappointment in his voice, and after glancing at the letter, looked up at him again, saying, "The course of true love is not running smooth, eh? This lady is in Nice, I see."

"Yes, Harrison," he answered gravely, leaning against the table with head slightly bent. "We are parted, and I fear that, after all, I have acted foolishly."

"You will, no doubt, remember my advice on the day of your father's death."

"I do," George answered, huskily. "At that time I fondly believed she loved me, and was prepared to sacrifice everything in order that she should be mine. But now—"

"Well?"

"Her letters have grown colder, and I have a distinct and painful belief that she loves me no longer, that she has, amid the mad whirl of gaiety on the Riviera, met some man who has the means to provide her with the pleasures to which she has been accustomed, and upon whom she looks with favour. Her letters now are little more than the formal correspondence of a friend. She has grown tired of waiting."

"And are you surprised?" Harrison asked.

"I ought not to be, I suppose," he said gloomily. "I can never hope to marry her."

"Why despair?" the old solicitor exclaimed kindly. "You have youth, talent, and many influential friends, therefore there is no reason why your success at the Bar should not be as great as other men's."

"Or as small as most men's," he laughed bitterly. "No, Harrison, without good spirits it is impossible for one to do one's best. Those I don't possess just now."

"Well, if, because you are parted a few months, the lady pleases to forsake you, as you suspect, then all I can say is that you are very fortunate in becoming aware of the truth ere it is too late," the elder man argued.

"But I love her," he blurted forth. "I can't help it."

"Then, under the circumstances, I would, if I were you, stick to my profession and try and forget all that's past. Bitter memories shorten life and do nobody any good."

"Ah! I only wish I could get rid of all thought of the past," he sighed, gazing fixedly into the fire. "You are my friend and adviser, Harrison, or I should not have spoken thus to you."

The old man, with his blue foolscap still in his thin, bony hand, paused, regarded his client's son with a look of sympathy for a few moments, and sighed.

"Your case," he said at last, "is only one of many thousands. All of us, in whatever station, have our little romances in life. We have at some time or another adored a woman who, after the first few months, has cast us aside for a newer and perhaps richer lover. There are few among us who cannot remember a sweet face of long ago, a voice that thrilled us, a soft, caressing hand that was smooth as satin to our lips. We sigh when we recollect those long-past days, and wonder where she is, who she married, and whether, in her little debauches of melancholy, she ever recollects the man who once vowed he would love her his whole life through. Years have gone since then, yet her memory clings to us as vividly as if she were still a reality in our lives. We still love her and revere her, even though she cast us aside, even though we are not certain whether she still exists. The reason of all this is because when we are young we are more impressionable than when we are older, with wider and more mature experience of the world. The woman we at twenty thought adorable we should pass by unnoticed if we were forty. Thus it is that almost all men cherish in their hearts a secret affection for some woman who has long ago gone out of their lives, passed on, and forgotten them."

George smiled bitterly at the old man's philosophy. "Are you, then, one of those with a romance within you?" he asked, his face suddenly becoming grave again.

"Yes," the old lawyer answered, his features hard and cold. "I, dry-as-dust, matter-of-fact man that I am, I also have my romance. Years ago, how many I do not care to count, I loved a woman just as madly as you love Liane Brooker. She was of good family, wealthy, and so handsome that a well-known artist painted her portrait, which was hung at

one of the Galleries as one of a collection of types of English beauty. That she loved me I could not doubt, and the first six months of our acquaintance in the quaint old cathedral town where we lived was a dream of sunny, never-ending days. At evening, when the office at which I was articled was closed, she met me, and we walked together in the sunset by the river. I see her now, as if it were but yesterday, in her simple white dress and large hat trimmed with roses. The years that have passed have not dimmed my memory."

And the old man, pausing, sat with his steely eyes gazing into the fire, a hardness in the corners of his mouth as if the recollection of the past was painful.

"Months went by," he continued in a harsh voice, quite unlike the tone habitual to him. "She knew that I was poor, yet against the wishes of her parents, purse-proud county people, she had announced her intention of waiting a year or two, and then marrying me. At length there came a day when I found it necessary to exchange the quiet respectability of Durham for the bustle of a London office, and left. Ours was a sad farewell, one night beneath the moon. She took my ring from my finger, kissed it and replaced it, while I kissed her hair, and we exchanged vows of undying love. Then we parted. Well, you may guess the rest. Within three months she was a wife, but I was not her husband. From the moment when we said farewell on that memorable night I never saw her nor heard from her again. Times without number I wrote, but my letters remained unanswered, until I saw in the papers the announcement of her marriage with some man who I ascertained later had amassed a fortune at the Cape and had taken her out there with him. Though I have grown old, I have never ceased to remember her, because she was the one woman I adored, the woman who comes once into the life of every man to lighten it, but who, alas! too often forsakes him for reasons incomprehensible and leaves him solitary and forgotten, with only a deep-cherished memory as consolation. So it is with you, George," he added. "It may be, as you fear, that Liane Brooker has grown weary, yet remember the old adage that a woman's mind and winter wind change oft, and reflect that if after her solemn vow to you she breaks her pledge, she is unworthy."

"I know," he answered. "Nevertheless she is my well-beloved."

"So to me was the woman of whom I have just spoken," he answered. "Nevertheless, that did not prevent me marrying ten years later and living in perfect happiness with my wife till her death six years ago. No, the thought of the past is the privilege of all men. I admit that it is doubly hard in your case that, having sacrificed your fortune for sake of her, you should now find yourself being slowly replaced in her heart by some other man. Nevertheless, I repeat I am not surprised."

"But you sympathise with me, although I speak so foolishly," he said, half apologetically.

"It is no foolish talk," Harrison replied. "There is surely no foolishness in discussing a matter that so closely concerns a man's future," he said. "Of course you have my most sincere sympathy, and if at any time I can offer advice or render assistance, then command me."

"You are extremely good," the young man replied. "The mystery surrounding Liane, the tragic death of Nelly Bridson, the discovery of the missing miniature, and the unfortunate girl's acquaintance with this unknown woman whom my father designated as my wife, form an enigma of which, try how I will, I am unable to obtain any elucidation. Through all these months not a single important fact has come to light."

"True. It's an extraordinary affair altogether," Harrison acquiesced, replacing the inquiry agent's report in his breast-pocket. "But I still hope we may discover Mariette Lepage, and through her we shall certainly be able to learn something. Until then, we must remain patient."

The pained, thoughtful expression that had rested upon his face, while he had been telling George the romance of his life, had been succeeded by that keen business-like air he always wore. He was again the plain, matter-of-fact lawyer, with his clean-shaven aquiline face, his cold steel-blue eyes and thin lips that gave those who did not know him an impression of almost ascetic austerity.

George Stratfield made no answer, but when a few minutes later his visitor had gone, after placing his hand sympathetically upon his shoulder and bidding him bear up against misfortune, he cast himself again into his chair and sat immovable, heedless of everything save the one woman who was his idol.

Chapter Eight.

The Promenade des Anglais.

Nice, the town of violets and mimosa, of confetti, of gay dominoes and pretty women, is at its best in February, white, clean, and ready for the reception of its most welcome guest, King Carnival. While England is still gloomy with rain and fogs, and wintry winds still moan through the bare branches, the weather is already summer-like, with bright sunshine, soft warm breezes, and a sea of that intense sapphire blue which only the Mediterranean can assume. Little wonder it is that the gay world of every European capital should flock to Nice, so mild is its climate, and so many and unique are its attractions.

Superbly situated on the broad beautiful Bay of Anges, with the promontories of Ferrat and Antibes jutting out in the far distance on either side, and sheltered by the lower terraces of the Maritime Alps, it presents a handsome appearance, with the heights of Cimiez and other fertile olive-clad hills forming a fitting background. Close to the sea, in the centre of the town, is the pretty Jardin Public, with its cascade and cavern of hanging stalactites, and behind is the fine Place Massena, wherein stands the handsome white Casino Municipal, while along the coast to the right stretches the world-famed Promenade des Anglais, a magnificent esplanade bordered by palatial hotels and villas, all uniformly white, the roadway planted with palms, oranges, cypresses and aloes, and laid out with beds of sweet-

smelling flowers.

Although February, the oranges are ripe, and roses and carnations are already in full blossom; the Jardin Public is a blaze of brilliant colour, and as one turns from the Promenade into the clean white streets the fragrance of violets hawked in huge bunches at four sous by the flower-girls greets the nostrils at every corner. Nice is indeed a town of flowers. The garden of each villa is full of them—almost every person in the street wears a buttonhole or carries violets, the florists' shops diffuse the odour of mimosa and roses far and near, and even the confectioners sell dainty little round boxes of violets and roses crystallised in sugar. In those spring days Nice is verily in Carnival mood. Her hotels are full, her shops display the daintiest fabrics possible, and as to hats and sunshades—for both of which the town is famous—it is doubtful whether such daring feats of millinery, as fetching as they are audacious, can be found in any city or any clime the world over. Certainly nowhere else is there a brighter or more animated scene than that witnessed on the cemented footway of the Promenade des Anglais on a February morning. Furs have long ago been discarded, and silk blouses and sunshades testify to the warmth of the brilliant sun, while the male portion of the visitors are attired in straw hats and suits of summer tweed. Truly cosmopolitan and polyglot is that chattering throng. One rubs shoulders with barons, counts and highnesses of every nationality, and hears every European language uttered by gay laughing lips; the sibilant French of the dainty Parisienne, the musical Italian, the guttural German, the rapid English and the slow Russian, all combine to make a veritable Babel of tongues, while by the costumes alone, many of them marvellous creations of the famous men-dressmakers, the race of their wearers may usually be determined. Fashionable Europe is making happy holiday amid premature summer.

Amid this chattering crowd of pleasure-seekers Liane was strolling beside Prince Zertho one morning a fortnight after old Mr Harrison had visited George in his dingy London chambers. Gowned in pearl grey, the fitting of which bore the impress of the Parisian costumier, and with a large hat to match, she walked on, chatting, laughing, and ever and anon bowing to those she knew; while the Prince, in black jacket suit and soft felt hat of silver-grey, lounged leisurely along beside her, smoking a cigarette, and listening amusedly to her light, vivacious gossip. Her appearance was entirely different to the trim, neatly-dressed girl who, in cotton blouse and shabby skirt, had cycled over the level Berkshire roads. With her pure and perfect French, her slim waist girdled narrow, her *chevelure* as carefully arranged as if by a maid of the first order, one might have easily mistaken her for a true Parisienne. Her beautiful face, combined with her delightful *chic*, caused many to turn and glance after her as she passed, a fact not unnoticed by her companion.

Her cheeks, no longer wan as they had been at Stratfield Mortimer, were again flushed with health; her eyes sparkled with pleasure as she became conscious of the profound admiration she everywhere evoked, and in her footstep was the lightness of one in whose heart there lurked no shadow.

The day was perfect. Both sea and sky were of a deep, intense blue, the long line of sun-blached villas and hotels were gay with visitors, the trees wore their freshest green, and the sweet scent of violets pervaded everything. As they walked, Zertho was reflecting how striking was her beauty, even among that crowd of Europe's prettiest and wealthiest women.

Through November and December she and her father had remained in Paris, and early in the new year had travelled down to Nice, taking up their quarters at a small select "pension" in one of the large white villas which, standing in its own pretty garden planted with oranges, palms and roses, faced the Mediterranean at the end of the Promenade towards the Magnan, while close by them Zertho occupied the handsome Villa Chevrier, a great white house with palms in front, which also faced the sea at the corner of the Rue Croix de Magnan.

In Nice a wealthy man can, if he desires, easily obtain a large cosmopolitan circle of friends, therefore, the villa of Prince Zertho d'Auzac quickly became a social centre, for his entertainments being upon a scale almost unequalled, he found no lack of acceptances to his invitations. Everyone in Nice soon knew him by sight; the well-informed *Petit Niçois* mentioned him almost daily in its "Echoes de Partout," the *Swiss and Nice Times* devoted whole columns to descriptions of his fêtes and lists of his guests, among which figured many well-known names, and the *Phare du Littoral* was loud in its praises of his dinners, his driving parties, and the dances at his house. Well-groomed and usually attired in a dark suit, he walked in the Avenue de la Gare, drove tandem with Liane at his side along the Promenade, rode his unmatched bay on the Corniche Road, or strolled about the Casino, and was everywhere recognised, for he was indeed the man of the hour.

He smiled, however, when he recollected how, two years before, he had occupied an apartment "au troisième" in the narrow noisy Rue de France, while Liane, Nellie and the Captain had lived equally precariously in the Rue Dalpozzo, close by. Often dependent on his wits for a meal he had more than once, he remembered, strolled out upon that same Promenade where he now walked with Liane, in search of some inexperienced youth from whom he might obtain a few louis at cards, and thus stave off starvation for the next few days. Their run of ill-luck had almost knocked them both under until one night after the Captain had won a considerable sum at Monte Carlo, a sudden suggestion occurred to them, and together they started a private gaming-house in the Boulevard Gambetta, in Nice, a place which, although remaining open only a few months, gained a decidedly unenviable repute. Nevertheless, both men found their venture a most profitable one, and it is more than likely that their avarice would have led them into the arms of the police had not Brooker, at Liane's instigation, suddenly dissolved the partnership, taken his money, and returned to England.

Liane knew Nice well. Some of the most weary anxious and monotonous days of her life had been spent in a well-remembered frowsy room high up in that narrow back street which smelt eternally of garlic, where they had lived for nine months almost penniless. In those days when the Fates were unkind neither she nor Nelly ever ventured upon the Promenade in the day-time, because their dresses were too dowdy, and they feared lest they should encounter some of the people with whom they had become acquainted when living at the big hotels at Monte Carlo, Mentone, or Cannes, as they did when their father prospered. Yet she had now come back to the town she once abhorred. Her father had sufficient to keep them both respectably and in comfort, and Zertho was almost, if not quite, a millionaire. Fortune they had so often courted had smiled at last upon them all.

They were almost constantly at the Villa Chevrier. Each morning the Prince would call with his tandem and take her for a drive, returning in time for half an hour's walk on the Promenade before *déjeuner*, then a lazy afternoon, a dinner with guests, a visit to the Opera, to the Casino, or perhaps to a ball. So passed the warm, brilliant days delightfully.

People soon began to inquire who was the handsome, sweet-faced English girl with whom the Prince was seen so often, but Liane, entirely ignorant of Zertho's mysterious influence over her father, or of his motive, merely regarded him with the cordiality of an old friend. Zertho, even in the old days, had always treated her with studied courtesy, had often bought her sweetmeats and flowers, and was fond of teasing her good-humouredly and promising to find her a wealthy husband. It was he who had made both girls unexpected presents of bicycles after their return to England, and never once, even when almost penniless, had he forgotten to send them some trifle on their birthdays. Although he had been her friend she nevertheless had regarded him with some slight, ill-defined mistrust. Why, she had never been able to determine.

Though moving in the gay world of fashion and frivolity, of gambling and kindred vices, she was not of it. Her knowledge of man's sins and woman's frailty was wider than that of most girls of her age, yet she had remained sweet, simple, and ingenuous. Often, when at home in her room overlooking the sea, she would stand out upon the balcony and gaze away at the horizon distant in the broad expanse of blue, thinking deeply of George and wondering how he fared. Still she reflected that, after all, life was far more pleasant there than in the lethargic Berkshire village. Yet amid that constant whirl of gaiety she never forgot those days that were past. Even on that bright morning as at Zertho's side she passed along, her sweet face fresh beneath her cream sunshade, she remembered the time when neither Nelly nor herself dare walk there—those days of dire misfortune when only twenty sous lay between them and starvation.

Strolling on through the well-dressed throng they presently met the Captain, spruce in a suit of dark grey with soft hat and brown boots, walking slowly, in conversation with a portly Frenchman who had been the Prince's guest on the previous evening. Saluting, Zertho and his fair companion passed on and continuing their walk strolled leisurely back to the Villa Chevrier.

"Why are you so thoughtful?" her companion asked presently in French, having noticed her wonderful grey eyes fixed upon the calm sunlit sea.

"It is woman's privilege to think," she replied, laughing as she turned to him with her clear eyes expressive of the soul that lay behind. "I was reflecting upon the difference between our life two years ago and what it is to-day."

"Yes, slightly better, isn't it? Well, it is luck—always luck," he answered. "Your father is going over to Monte Carlo to-morrow, and I hope that Fortune may be kind also to him. He has waited long enough for a change of luck."

Liane regarded him steadily for an instant, then said reproachfully,—

"It is you who have persuaded him. Why have you done this, when you know full well that half an hour at roulette will bring back upon him the mania for play, the fatal recklessness that must be his ruin and mine? This is surely not the action of a friend."

"Ah! forgive me," he exclaimed, quickly. "I had no idea that my suggestion to drive you both over there to-morrow would displease you."

"I'll make an excuse to him, and we will not go," he added, deferentially.

She was not a little surprised that he should thus alter his plans in conformity to her wish, nevertheless his decision satisfied her. She knew that her father had but little money, and certainly he had none to risk. Little did she dream that the cost of her rich, perfectly-fitting dresses, which had been so admired of late upon the Promenade and in the Casino, had been defrayed by her whilom friend, and that every sou her father was spending came also from his pocket. She was in ignorance of the strange, inviolable secret which existed between the two men; that secret, the price of which was her own self.

Too much of life had she seen to be dazzled by the gay, brilliant set of which she had found herself a centre, nevertheless, time after time she reflected, when alone, that she was neglecting George sadly; she had an instinctive fear that her letters to him were devoid of any warmth of affection, yet somehow she could not prevent it. Being thrown so much into Zertho's society he frequently asked her advice, and she thus unconsciously became interested in the success of his fêtes.

She and her father spent the day at the Villa, as usual, and after dinner drove down to the Place Massena to witness one of the great annual events of Nice, the arrival of King Carnival Long before they drove down, the town was already agog, for Carnival is in the blood of the Southerners. The illuminations were unanimously voted worthy of Nice. From their stands on the balcony of the Casino they could see that from end to end the broad Avenue de la Gare was ablaze with red and white lights, festoons of small lamps being connected at intervals with large red stars of hanging lamps. The Place Massena was lighted up with gas-jets in white, blue, and green globes, forming arabesques; the Casino was encircled with lines of gas-jets, and the façade of the immense tribune opposite a brilliant blaze of colour.

Liane stood up and surveyed the scene. The immense square was thronged, the crowd being kept back by infantry. After some waiting the sounds of noisy music, the blasts of many horns, and the dancing lights of hundreds of torches at last heralded the approach of the Monarch of Mirth. Mounted gendarmes opened the way; then came the trumpeters of the 6th Chasseurs, followed by the heralds of Nice in costumes embroidered with the arms of the town. The colours of the Carnival were red and rose, and the shops around were gay with dominoes of those hues.

Madame Carnival was the first gigantic figure to appear amid the glare of the great braziers of crimson fire. Seated on what might be termed a gilt throne, and wearing a white frilled cap, a silk shawl, and clean apron, she looked altogether very smart, gracefully wielding a fan, and occasionally winking her enormous eyes. In front of the car was her six-months-old baby, held by two giant hands, while in the rear, in a big basket, was the remainder of her family, a turbulent crowd of youngsters in fancy garb. Following another regiment of musicians and torch-bearers came the lord and master, King Carnival, represented as a peasant in his best white hat with tricolour rosette, astride a turkey-cock, which ever and anon moved its head and spread its tail.

Among the other cars which followed was one representing a café-concert; a chimpanzee which moved its head and swallowed smaller monkeys; a car of animated fans; and "a charmer and her fools" represented by a beauty who sat upon a throne, and by pulling a string set dancing her crowd of foppish admirers. The *groupes à pied*, too, were amusing and numerous, one entitled "Dragging the Devil by the Tail," representing Satan with a tail of enormous length, at which all who were hard up were pulling vigorously. There were polkas of Hammers, Bakers, Felt hats, and walking alarum clocks, as well as a varying and amusing panorama of single maskers. Among these latter were represented a wine-dealer, who had closed his shop in order "to baptise his wines;" Cupid bandaging a lover's eyes; Love stopping a fair cyclist and asking whether he had been forgotten; "Hurrah!" who had shouted so much that his mouth had become an enormous size, and a drunkard stopping at a fountain believing the drinking-cup to be a telephone transmitter!

Fully two hours the procession occupied in passing and re-passing, and of the gay party who had met the Prince at his invitation, Liane was perhaps the most vivacious. With a sable cape about her shoulders she sat next him, with her father on her left, laughing and criticising the groups, the spirit of Carnival having already entered her Southern blood, as it had that of the merry, light-hearted Niçois themselves.

At last she drove home with her father and the Prince, while the monarch of cap and bells was placed in the handsome pavilion erected for him, there to preside over the corsos, vegliones, and the battles of flowers and confetti which for twelve days, until his immolation on Mardi-Gras, would render Nice a town gone mad with frolic.

The Promenade was bright as day beneath the full moon, the feathery palms waved lazily in the breeze, and the dark waves broke with musical monotony upon the pebbly beach. They had alighted at the gate of the pension where the Captain had taken up his quarters, when the Prince suggested to Liane that they should go for a stroll, as it was still early. To this she assented, and the Captain went indoors and sat alone, silent and wondering, while they crossed the deserted esplanade together and walked in the moonlight by the shore.

"So you have enjoyed yourself to-night, *ma petite?*" Zertho said, after they had been chatting some time.

"Immensely," she answered. "Carnival is not fresh to me, but it is always amusing. Every Niçois enjoys it so thoroughly. I love these gay, happy, contented people who are still Italian although French. They are so different from the English."

"You hated them once, I remember," he observed, with a smile, pausing to light a cigarette.

"Ah! that was in the evil days. One's enjoyment is always gauged by one's pocket."

"Then according to that theory I ought to have a larger measure of this world's pleasures than the majority of people—eh?"

"You have."

"Ah, no, Liane," he sighed, becoming suddenly grave. "True, I have wealth, a house in Brussels, an estate in Luxembourg, a yacht in yonder port, and a villa here upon this promenade, yet there is one thing I lack to render my happiness complete."

"What's that?" she asked, rather surprised at the unusual tone of sadness in his voice. Her smiling lips suddenly quivered with a momentary dread—a dread of something she could not quite define.

He had paused at one of the seats at the end of the plage, and with a alight courteous wave of the hand invited her to sit. Slowly she did as she was bid, and awaited his reply.

"I have not yet found any woman to sufficiently care for me," he answered at last, in a quiet impressive tone.

"You will surely have no difficulty," she said with a strange ring in her voice. She had not suspected that he possessed a grain of sentiment, for long ago she had noticed that he was entirely unimpressionable where the charms of women were concerned.

His manner suddenly changed. He sank into the seat beside her, saying,—

"There is something, Liane, I want to say to you I've said it so often to myself that I feel as if you must know it." She sat quite still. He had grasped her small hand in his, and she let him keep it, questioning his face with a bewildered gaze. "You must know—you must have guessed—"

She turned pale, but outwardly quelled the panic that sent the blood to her heart. "I must tell you the truth now—I love you."

With a sudden movement she freed her hand and drew away from him.

"Me!" she gasped. Whatever potential complicity had lurked in her heart, his words brought her only immeasurable dismay.

He bent towards her again. "Yes, you!"

She felt his hot breath upon her cheek, and put up her hand with imploring gesture. He looked at her with almost frenzied admiration, as if it were only with fierce resolve that he restrained himself from seizing her in his arms and closing her mouth with burning kisses. His whole frame quivered in the fury of repressed excitement, insomuch that she shrank from him with involuntary terror.

"Can't you tell me what it is that makes me repugnant to you?" he asked quickly.

"You are not repugnant at all," she faltered hoarsely. "You are not repugnant, only—I am indifferent."

"You mean that you don't care about me one way or the other."

She shut her lips tight. Hers was not a nature so passionate as that of most Southerners, but a loving one; feeling with her was not a single simple emotion, but a complicated one of many impulses—of self-diffidences, of deep, strange aspirations that she herself could scarcely understand—a woman's pride, the delight of companionship and sympathy and of the guidance of a stronger will; a longing for better things. All these things were there. But beside them were thoughts of the man she had vowed she loved, the man who was ruined and who could not for years hope to make her his wife. She looked at the glittering moonlit sea, with the light steadily burning in the far distance at Antibes, but no answer escaped her lips. The silence of night was complete save for the rhythmic swish of the waves at their feet.

At last, after a long pause, her words came again, shudderingly, "Oh, what have you done?"

"By Heaven!" he said, with a vague smile, "I don't know. I hope no harm."

"Oh, don't laugh!" she cried, laughing hysterically herself. "Unless you want me to think you the greatest wretch in the world."

"I?" he responded. "What do you mean?"

"You know you are fooling me," she answered reproachfully. "You cannot put your hand on your heart and swear that you actually love me."

A quick look of displeasure crossed his face, but his back was towards the moon and she did not notice it.

"Yes—yes, I can—I will," he answered. "You must have known it, Liane. I've been abrupt, I know, and I've startled you, but if you love me you must attribute that to my loving you so long before I have spoken."

Her troubled breast heaved and fell beneath her rich fur. She gazed at him with parted lips.

"It is a question from me to you," he went on, "the question of my life."

"No, don't think so," she protested, "please, don't ask it."

"Then don't answer it, Liane. Wait—let me wait. Ask yourself—"

"I know my own mind already," she said slowly, with earnestness; then perceiving, as suddenly as she had all the rest, how considered her assertion might appear, she went on, still with the quietness of clear-seeing and truth-telling: "things come clear in an instant. This does, that I could not have thought of. I am already betrothed to another; that is why I cannot accept."

"You can't expect me to be satisfied with that," he answered. "I, who know myself, and who see you as you do not see yourself. It is I who ask: who want to take a great gift. I am not offering myself," he went on rapidly. "I am beseeching yourself—of you."

"I have not myself to give," she said calmly.

"You mean you love someone else," he said, with a hardness about the corners of his mouth.

"Yes," and the long eyelashes swept downward as she answered.

But Zertho paid no attention to her reply. "During the years I have known you, Liane," he went on, "the thought of you has been as a safeguard against my total disbelief in the possibility of woman's fidelity. I knew then that I revered you with my better self all the while—that, young as you were, I believed in you. I believe in you now. Be my wife, and from this instant I will devote all the love in me—and I have more than you think—to you alone."

"Prince Zertho," she said, in honest distress, "I beg you won't go on! I respect your devotion and your kindness, and I don't want to inflict any hurt upon you; but oh! indeed, you must not ask this."

"Very well," he said sadly, rising to his feet. "Let it all be. I will not despair. You know now that I love you, and ere long I shall ask you again as I have asked. Defer your answer until then."

"Let us go back," she urged, shivering as she rose. "The wind has grown cold;" and in silence they together retraced their steps along the deserted Promenade.

An hour later, when Liane had gone to her room, the Captain, at Zertho's request, walked along to the Villa Chevrier, and found his friend awaiting him in the handsome salon.

When the servant closed the door the Prince was the first to speak.

"To-night I have asked Liane to become my wife," he said harshly, standing with his hands in his pockets.

"Well?"

"She refuses."

"As I expected," answered her father coldly.

"As you wish, you mean," retorted Zertho.

"I have already explained my views," the other answered, in a deep strained voice.

"From her attitude it is evident that you have not spoken to her, as we arranged," said the other angrily.

"I have said nothing."

"Well, you know me sufficiently well, Brooker, to be aware that when I set my heart upon doing a thing I will accomplish it at all cost," the Prince, exclaimed. "I'm no longer an outsider, remember, I cannot really understand your disinclination to allow Liane to become Princess d'Auzac. Surely you must see that it would be distinctly to your own advantage. She would take care that you'd never be hard up for a few hundreds, you know."

"She does not love you, Zertho."

"Love be hanged!" cried the other, fiercely impatient. "In a week I shall repeat my proposal to her: if she does not accept, well—"

"Well?" echoed Brooker, paler than before, the hand holding the cigar trembling, for he was feigning a coolness which he was unable to preserve.

For a moment the Prince paused then crossing to the *escritoire*, which stood in the window, took therefrom a folded newspaper, old and tattered, together with several other papers folded together lengthwise. Recrossing to where Brooker stood, he held them up to his gaze, with a sinister smile upon his lips, and a look full of menace.

"No! no!" cried the Captain, glaring at the innocent-looking papers, and drawing back with a gesture of repulsion.

"Very well," Zertho answered, with nonchalance. "Strange though it may appear, your only chance of safety is in becoming my father-in-law. It will be easy enough for you to persuade Liane to become my wife, and I am ready and eager to remain your friend. But if your prejudices are so very intense and indiscreet, well—you know the rest."

The two men who had been fellow-adventurers faced each other. In the countenance of one was confidence, in the other abject fear.

"I never expected this of you, Zertho," the Captain said reproachfully, regarding him with eyes in which flashed the fire of anger. "You apparently heed nothing of my feelings as her father. You know my past; you know that Liane brings into my life its only ray of brightness."

"We are no longer partners," the other answered harshly, with a strangely determined expression upon his dark countenance. "You are playing against me now, therefore I am your opponent. You've thought fit to deal the cards, it's true," he added, with a short derisive laugh; "but I think you'll have to admit that I hold all the trumps."

Chapter Nine.

The Way of Transgressors.

One thought alone possessed Liane. Zertho loved her.

Next morning when the maid brought her coffee, she rose, and opening the sun-shutters, stood at the window gazing upon the broad expanse of bright blue sea. The words the Prince had uttered all came back to her. She recollected how he had pressed her hand, and declared that she was his ideal of what a woman should be; how, not satisfied with her refusal, he had promised to repeat his question. Should she accept? No, she distrusted him as much as she had ever done.

While thus plunged in deep reflection, her clear eyes fixed upon the distant horizon where ships were passing, endeavouring to convince herself that marriage with Zertho was impossible because she could never love him, a light tap was heard upon the door, and the girl re-entered, bearing a letter.

By its blue English stamp, she knew instinctively it was from George.

Slowly she tore open the envelope and read its contents. Then, with a sudden movement, she cast herself upon her bed, burying her face in the lace-edged pillow, and bursting into a torrent of passionate tears. She hated Zertho, and still loved George.

Meanwhile, her father had risen, and gone out for an early turn along the Promenade. He let himself out at the rear into the Rue de France, in order not to pass the Villa Chevrier, and after strolling for some time about the town, he reached the sea again walking alone, his face set towards the high castle hill, which he presently ascended by the winding flight of stone steps, and standing at last on the summit, in the beautiful garden laid out on the side of the long-ruined *château*, paused to rest. The sun was strong, the sky cloudless, and in every direction the view was

superb. As he stood leaning over the stone parapet, the Cape of Antibes, the Iles de Lerins, the mouth of the broad stony Var, and the town of Nice were at his feet, while behind stretched the green valley of the Paillon, with the white monasteries of Cimiez and St Pons, the distant château of St Andre, the peaks of Mont Chauve, and the Aspremont, with the blue distant Alps forming a picturesque background. He removed his hat, and allowed the fresh breeze that came up from the sea to fan his heated temples.

He was alone, save for a solitary sentinel standing with fixed bayonet some distance away, at the entrance to a large platform, where several guns were mounted behind baskets filled with stones, and as he leaned, his eyes fixed blankly upon the sea, some low words escaped him.

"Yes," he murmured in desperation, "this is indeed the last drop that has filled my cup of affliction. Poor Liane! How can I tell her? How can I go to her and confess the ghastly truth? If I do; if I tell her of the terrible secret which I had believed was mine alone, she—the child whom I have loved and cherished all these years, will turn from me with loathing."

His hands were clenched, his brow furrowed, and upon his usually merry countenance was a settled look of unutterable despair.

"No, it is impossible—absolutely impossible," he went on, sighing deeply, after a few moments. "To tell her the truth would only be to increase her unhappiness and cause her to hate me, therefore I cannot—I dare not! No; Zertho is inexorable. I must sacrifice Liane in order to save myself."

Again he was silent, pondering deeply, and striving to form some plan by which to save his daughter from being forced into this undesirable union. But he could conceive none. Even if he defied this man who was endeavouring to secure Liane, and boldly met the terrible consequences of the exposure of his secret, he saw that such a course must reflect upon her, for she would then be alone in the world—friendless, forsaken and penniless; while if he fled, he must be found sooner or later, for within twenty-four hours the police of Europe would be actively searching for him. Then, calmly and without fear, he thought of suicide, his one desire being to save Liane from disgrace. Leaning over the parapet, he gazed far down upon the brown, rocky crags, beaten time after time by the great rolling waves as they broke and threw up columns of white spray. He was contemplating how best to end his life. He could leave her a letter confessing all the truth, and thus save her from becoming the wife of this titled adventurer. Yet again a difficulty presented itself. To act thus would be cowardly; besides which Liane would also be left without money, and without a protector. For a long time he carefully reviewed all the facts, at length arriving at the same conclusion as before, that his suicide would only bring increased disaster upon the child he idolised.

"No," he exclaimed aloud, between his set teeth. "There is but one way—one way alone. She must become Princess. I must obey Zertho, and compel her to marry him. All these long weeks have I striven against it, knowing that once united to such an unprincipled brute, her days must be full of wretchedness and despair. Nay, I am prepared to sacrifice everything for her sake; nevertheless, if I boldly face my enemies, or take my life to escape them, the result would be the same. Liane would be left friendless. To me through all these dark days she has been the one joy of my aimless, weary life; hers has been the one bright face that has cheered me times without number when I should have otherwise knocked under. I have striven my best to keep her uncontaminated by the reckless world in which I've been compelled to move, and none can ever charge me with neglect of her. Yet this is the end. She must be torn from me, and be given to this unscrupulous blackmailer whom the possession of wealth has converted from my friend into my enemy."

Erle Brooker, by profession an adventurer, but at heart generous and tender as a woman, had come to Nice solely on Liane's account, because he had been convinced by Zertho's argument that she was moping sadly at Stratfield Mortimer. Although he had accepted the invitation he had never for one moment intended that Liane should become Princess d'Auzac until his whilom partner had pronounced it imperative. Then, hour by hour, day by day, he had sought means whereby Zertho might be dissuaded from pressing his claim, until now he was compelled to acknowledge his hope an utterly forlorn one.

"Alas!" he sighed, leaning his fevered weary head on both his hands. "All happiness and gaiety must be crushed from her heart; her young life must be wrecked because of my sin. I, her father, must persuade, nay insist upon her taking a step that she must regret her whole life through, and use towards that end arguments which I would rather my tongue were torn out than I should utter. Ah, Liane," he cried, brokenly, in a voice of despair, "if you could but realise all that I have suffered these past weeks. But you must not; you, at least, shall never know the cause of this deadly fear which holds me paralysed beneath the relentless thrall of the one man who knows the truth. No, you must marry him, and thereby secure his silence. Your consent to become Princess d'Auzac can alone save me."

Again he was silent, deep in contemplation of the terrible truth, when suddenly behind him sounded a peal of merry laughter, and turning quickly, he saw he had been joined upon the platform by Liane and two bright English girls who were living at the same pension with them. They had ascended the long flights of steps, and were entirely out of breath.

"Why, dear old dad!" cried Liane, in surprise, "whoever would have thought of finding you up here at this hour?"

The Captain laughed uneasily, and made some evasive reply regarding the clearness of the morning and the extent of the view.

"Oh, isn't it magnificent!" cried the other girls in chorus, as they gazed around. Liane, who had been there on many previous occasions, had brought them up, promising them a fine panorama, and they certainly were not disappointed.

Together they wandered about the pretty gardens, watched the artillery at drill working the guns, peered down the old castle well and clambered about the ancient walls which had been torn down nearly two hundred years ago by

the Duke of Brunswick; then, after one of the girls had narrowly escaped losing her hat in the high wind, they descended again to the Rue des Ponchettes, where the Captain, excusing himself that he wanted to make a purchase in the town, left them.

The three girls, chatting and laughing, walked round the base of the hill, by the road called the Rauba Capeu, to the port, where the Prince d'Auzac's trim steam yacht was lying, afterwards retracing their steps along the Boulevard du Midi. They had passed the Jardin Public, where the band was playing Strauss's *Fesche Geister*, and had just entered the Promenade des Anglais, when Zertho on his fine bay rode past them raising his hat. The trio smiled and bowed, and while he galloped along, his smart groom at some little distance behind, one of Liane's companions remarked—

"Isn't the Prince a handsome fellow? I wonder he does not marry."

Liane felt her cheeks colouring.

"Oh! I suppose he will very soon," observed her sister. They were both tall, dark, good-looking girls, daughters of a wealthy widow from London. This was their first season on the Riviera, and all was fresh to them.

"You know the Prince well, don't you?" inquired the first girl who had spoken, turning to Liane.

"Yes," she answered. "We knew him long before he became rich."

"And his wealth has spoilt him, I expect? It does most men."

"No, I can scarcely say that," answered Liane. "At heart he is so thoroughly cosmopolitan and so merry that I don't think he will ever become purse-proud."

"I've heard he's a millionaire," observed the other girl. "Is that true?"

"I believe so. His father was the wealthiest man in Luxembourg; richer even than the reigning Grand Duke Adolphe."

"And whoever marries him will be Princess d'Auzac," the girl remarked, contemplatively. "Rather jolly, I should imagine, to be a Princess with an ancient title like that. One could then cut a decent figure in society, I envy the fortunate girl who takes his fancy."

Liane winced. She feared that her cheeks told their own tale, and was thankful when a moment later the girls met their mother amid the crowd of promenaders, and all four commenced to chat upon a different subject.

That evening they did not dine as usual at the Villa Chevrier, but took their meal at the Pension, and afterwards, when Liane was reclining lazily on the couch in their private salon, her handsome head thrown back upon a great cushion of yellow silk, and the Captain was seated in a capacious easy chair, with a cigarette and an English paper, he at last braced himself up for an effort that was to him exceedingly repugnant. He feared that his words must choke him, and for half-an-hour glanced surreptitiously at her, hesitating to approach the subject. The recollection of all that he had to stake, however, goaded him on, and presently, slowly putting down his paper, and striving to remain firm, he uttered her name.

She looked up from her French novel in surprise. The tone in which he spoke was entirely unusual. It was harsh and strained.

"Liane," he said, bending and looking straight into her large, clear eyes, "I have wanted to speak seriously to you during these past few weeks, but have always hesitated."

"Why, father?"

"Because—well, I knew you were happy, and did not wish to cause you pain," he answered.

"Pain? What do you mean?" she inquired quickly.

"You have been very happy here in Nice, haven't you? I mean that Zertho has made life very pleasant for us both," he stammered.

"Certainly. Thanks to him, we've been extremely gay the whole time. So different to our last experience of the Riviera," and she laughed lightly at the recollection of those well-remembered evil days.

"You appear to find Zertho a very congenial companion," he observed.

She started. Surely her father could not know what had taken place between them during that walk by the moonlit sea on the previous night?

"Of course," she answered hesitatingly. "He was always a good friend to poor Nelly and myself, and he is very amusing."

"But I have noticed of late that your face betrays your happiness when you walk with him. A woman always shows in her cheeks a distinct consciousness of her success."

Her face flushed slightly as she answered,—

"I was not aware that I appeared any happier when in his society than on any other occasion."

"It is upon that very point that I desire to speak to you," he went on in a low serious tone. "You will remember that

before we left Stratfield Mortimer, I gave you a few words of kindly advice regarding an impossible lover with whom you had foolishly become infatuated."

"Yes," she said, "I well remember."

"Then it is upon the subject of your marriage that I want again to say a few words to you."

"Marriage!" she laughed. "Why, I shall not marry for years yet, dear old dad. Besides, if I left you, whatever would you do?"

"Ah, yes, my girl," he answered hoarsely, as a shadow of pain flitted for an instant across his darkened brow. "You must not lose the chance of youth."

She closed her book, placed it aside slowly, and regarded him with surprise.

"Haven't you always urged me to wait?" she asked half-reproachfully, toying with the two little gipsy rings upon her slim finger. "I understood that you were entirely against my marriage."

"So I was when you did not possess the chance of making a wealthy and satisfactory alliance," he replied.

His daughter looked at him inquiringly, but hazarded no remark. She saw by the expression of his face how terribly in earnest he was.

"You, of course, know to whom I refer," he added, speaking in a low, intense tone, as he bent towards her, gazing still seriously into the sweet, open countenance.

"To Zertho," she observed mechanically.

"Yes. If you reflect, as I have already reflected times without number during these past few weeks, Liane, you must recognise that your position as the daughter of an almost penniless adventurer, is by no means an enviable one. If anything happened to me you would be left without a friend, and without a penny. Such thoughts are, I admit, not exactly pleasant ones, nevertheless the truth must be faced, at this, the most important crisis of your life. Again, I have nothing to give you, and can hope for nothing. In the days bygone I managed to pick up sufficient to provide us with the comforts and luxuries of life, but now, alas! luck and friends have alike deserted me, and I am left ruined. I —"

"But you are not friendless, dear old dad," Liane cried suddenly, the light of affection glowing in her beautiful eyes as, with a sudden movement, she sprang across to him, and kneeling beside his chair as she often did, put both her soft, clinging arms about his neck. "I am your friend, as I have always been. I do not want to marry and leave you," and she burst into tears.

His voice became choked by a sob he vainly strove to keep back. He felt his resolution giving way, and bit his lip.

"If—if you would remain my friend, Liane, you will marry," he managed to ejaculate at last, although the words seemed to stifle him, and he hated himself for having uttered them.

"No, dad—I will never allow you to live alone."

"But you must, dearest," he answered with emphasis, fondly pushing back her dark hair from her brow. "Think what a chance you now have of securing position, wealth and everything which contributes to life's happiness. Zertho loves you."

"I know," she answered, with a touch of ineffable sadness in her voice and raising her tear-stained face to his. "But I am happy as I am, with you."

"True. Yet in a few months the money we have will become exhausted, and whence we shall obtain more I know not," he said with a look of despair. "You have a chance to become a princess—the wife of a man even wealthier than his sovereign—therefore you should seriously reflect, Liane, ere you refuse."

"How did you know that Zertho loves me?" she suddenly inquired, turning her frank face upward to his.

"Because he has told me," he answered, in a voice low almost as a whisper. "He asked my permission to speak to you and offer you marriage."

As he looked at her the thought flashed across his mind that he, her father, who loved her so dearly, was deceiving her. What would she say if she knew the truth?

"Yes," she exclaimed with a sigh, "he says that he loves me, and has asked me to become his wife. But I have refused."

"Why?"

"Because I do not, I cannot love him, dad. Surely you would never wish me to marry a man for whom I have no affection, and in whom I have no trust." Her father held his breath and evaded her gaze. Her argument was unassailable. The words stabbed his tortured conscience.

"But would not the fact of your becoming Princess d'Auzac place you in a position of independence such as thousands of women would envy?" he hazarded, again stroking her silky hair with tenderness. "You know Zertho well. He's a good fellow and would make you an excellent husband, no doubt."

"I can never marry him," she answered, decisively.

"You will refuse his offer?" he observed, hoarsely. Her firmness was causing him some anxiety.

"I have already refused," she replied.

Slowly he grasped her hand, and after a brief pause looked her steadily in the face, saying—

"Liane, you must become his wife."

"I love but one man, dad, and cannot love another," she sobbed passionately, her arms still about his neck.

"Forget him."

She remained silent a few moments; then, at last looking up with calm, inquiring gaze, asked—

"Why are you so earnestly persuading me to marry this man who is neither your true friend nor mine, dad? What object can you have in urging me to do what can only bring me grief and dire unhappiness?"

He made no reply. His face, she noticed, had grown hard and cold; he was entirely unlike himself.

"I love George," she went on. "I will only marry him."

"Surely you will not ruin all your future, and mine, for his sake," he blurted forth at last.

"Your future!" she gasped, drawing away from him and regarding him with sudden surprise as the truth dawned upon her. "I see it all now! With me as Princess d'Auzac, the wife of a wealthy man, you would never want."

His teeth were set. He held her small, soft hand so tightly that it hurt her. He tried to speak, but his lips refused to utter sound. He was persuading his daughter to wreck her young life in order to secure his own safety. The thought was revolting, yet he was forced to act thus: to stand calmly by and witness her self-sacrifice, or bear the consequences of exposure.

He bowed his head in agony of mind. A lump rose in his throat, so that his words were again stifled.

"My marriage would, I know, relieve you of a serious responsibility," she went on, calmly, without any trace of reproach. "I am not unmindful of the fact that if I married Zertho I should gain wealth and position; yet I do not love him. I—I hate him."

"He has been kind to us, and I believe he is extremely fond of you," he said, wincing beneath the lie that fear alone forced to his lips. "Is it not but natural that I should seek for you an improved social position and such wealth as will place you beyond all anxiety in future? Heaven knows that the past has been full enough of care and poverty."

"Ah! I know that, poor dad," Liane answered caressingly, in a tone of sympathy, her arms again about his neck. "In the days gone by, because you played fairly, and was never an unscrupulous sharper like Zertho, luck forsook you. They laughed at you because you cared so much for me: because you held Nelly and I aloof from the dregs of society into which you had fallen. You were courageous always, and never when the days were darkest did you relinquish hope, or did your love for me wane. Yet," and she paused, "yet if you still cared for me as once you did, I cannot but feel that you would hesitate ere you urged me to a hateful alliance with a man I can never love."

"I am but endeavouring to secure your future happiness, Liane," he answered, his voice sounding deep and hollow.

A silence fell, deep and impressive, broken only by the low, monotonous roar of the waves beating upon the shore outside, and the musical jingle of the bells on a pair of carriage-horses that were passing. Liane started as she recognised the sound. They were Zertho's. Erle Brooker would have rather died by his own hand ere he had persuaded her to marry this man; yet for the hundredth time he proved to himself that by suicide he would merely leave her unprotected, while she would most probably afterwards learn from Zertho the terrible secret which he was determined should, at all hazards, remain locked within his own troubled heart.

"To persuade me to marry the Prince is but to urge me to a doom worse than death," she exclaimed passionately at last. "No, dad, I am sure you would never wish me to do this when I am so contented to live as I am with you. If we are penniless—well, I shall never complain. It will not be the first time that I have wanted a meal, and gone early to bed because I've been hungry. I promise I'll not complain, only do not endeavour to force me to marry Zertho. Let me remain with you."

"Alas! you cannot, my child!" he answered in a hard, dry, agonised tone, his hand trembling nervously.

"Why?"

"You must forget young Stratfield, and become Princess d'Auzac," he said firmly, intense anxiety betrayed upon his haggard countenance.

"Never!"

"But you must," he cried brokenly, with emphasis. "It is imperative—for my sake, Liane—you must marry him, for my sake."

Chapter Ten.

Mask and Domino.

The world-famous Battle of Flowers had been fought in brilliant, cloudless weather along the Promenade des Anglais, and Liane riding alone in a victoria covered with violets and stocks set off with rose bows and ribbons, had been awarded a prize-banner, while Zertho, his coach adorned by Maréchal Niel roses and white lilac, entertained a party, and was a conspicuous figure in the picturesque procession. The crowd was enormous, the number of decorated carriages greater than ever before known, and as the contending parties, made up of people in carriages decorated with flowers and coloured ribbons, passed slowly along on either side of the broad drive, they kept up a brisk fire of small bouquets. As they went by, the occupants of the tribunes poured broadsides into the carriages, and the battle raged everywhere hot and furious. Liane, sitting alone embowered in violets, flushed with the excitement of throwing handfuls of flowers at all and sundry, found herself more than once in the very thick of the fray and was pelted until her hair escaped from its pins and she felt herself horribly untidy.

Brooker had excused himself from forming one of Zertho's party and had gone for a long walk into the country; but that night he reluctantly accompanied them to the great Veglione at the Opera, where all were in grotesque costume, both Zertho and himself wearing hideous masks with enormous red noses, while Liane was attired in the beautiful costume of an odalisque, which, at Zertho's desire, had been specially made for her in Paris. Folly reigned supreme in that whirlwind of light and colour, and although dancing was almost impossible in consequence of the crowded state of the beautifully decorated theatre, yet the fun was always fast and furious, and the first saffron streak had already showed over the grey misty sea before they entered their carriage to drive homeward.

Variety had now become Liane's very life, excitement the source and sustenance of her existence. Within the few days which had elapsed since the evening when her father had urged her to marry Zertho a complete change had come upon her. No longer was she dull, dreamy, and apathetic, but eager to embrace any opportunity whereby her thoughts might be turned from the one subject which preyed upon her mind. She entered thoroughly into the Carnival fun and frolic, and Zertho, believing that her gaiety arose from contentment, felt flattered, congratulating himself that after all she was not so averse to his companionship as he had once believed. Knowing nothing of love or sentiment he had no suspicion that her bright amused smile masked a weary bitterness, or that, after dancing half the night radiant and happy, and charming the hearts of men with her light coquetry, she would return to the silence of her own room before the wave-beaten shore, and there lie weeping for hours, murmuring the name of the man she loved. So skilfully did she conceal the poignant sorrow wearing out her heart that none but her father detected it, and he, sighing within himself, made no remark.

Through the warm sunny reign of King Carnival Zertho and his handsome companion were prominent figures everywhere, although the Captain, who had grown as dull and dispirited as his daughter had become gay and reckless, seldom accompanied them. Since that night when beside the sea Zertho had told her of his love, he had not again mentioned the subject, although they were often alone together. Sometimes he would accuse her of furious flirtation, but always with a good-humoured amused air, without any sign of jealousy in his manner. Truth to tell, he felt satisfaction that she should be the most universally admired girl in Nice. He remembered that her success was due to him, for had he not paid for the costly costumes and milliner's marvels which suited her beauty so well?

The bright cloudless days passed, full of frivolity. The King of Folly's reign was short, therefore the excitement while it lasted was kept up at fever-heat, the grand climax of the many festivities being reached by the Corso Carnavalesque and Battle of Confetti which took place on Sunday, ten days after the gigantic effigy of the Monarch of Mirth had been enthroned on the Place Massena in his Moorish pavilion of rose and gold.

All the paper confetti conflicts, pretty and vigorous as they had been, were but preliminary scrimmages to the genuine battle fought with pellets of grey chalk, veritable bullets. So hard are these that it is unsafe to venture out without a wire mask, therefore Zertho and Liane, in assuming their costumes that afternoon, did not neglect the precaution. Zertho wore the white dress of a pierrot; with large velvet buttons of pale rose; while Liane, in a domino of pale rose satin trimmed with red—the colours of that season—wore a clown's hat of rose. Both carried, strapped across their shoulders, capacious bags containing confetti, and a small tin scoop with which to throw their missiles. The mask of fine wire, like those used in fencing schools, having been assumed, they both entered the victoria and were driven down to the Jardin Public through which the Carnival procession, headed by the King himself, pipe in mouth, astride the turkey-cock, was at that moment wending its way.

The gun from the old Château had a few minutes before boomed forth the signal for the opening of hostilities, and the thousands of revellers on foot and in carriages, all wearing masks and dominoes, were carrying on a fierce and relentless combat. Alighting, Liane and her companion plunged into the rollicking riot, pelting the onlookers who were unmasked or who wore no dominoes, covering dark coats and dresses with great white dust-spots, and compelling the unfortunate ones to cry for quarter. On this, the maddest day of Folly's reign, Nice, from two o'clock until five, presented the appearance of a town run mad with fun. Every balcony, decorated with red and rose, was filled with spectators laughing at the antics of the armoured, quaintly-dressed throng; the timorous, taking refuge behind closed windows, peered curiously out upon the wild conflict, while some, more brave than others, ventured out into the thick of the fray with no further protection than the black velvet half-mask. Woe betide these, however, when detected. Wire masks were the only safeguard from the showers of bullets which everywhere were projected from the small tin scoops.

Joining in the Corso were many carriages decked out to correspond with their occupants' costumes, many in the carnival colours, one in pure white, another in a mauve, and a third, belonging presumably to a political enthusiast, in the Russian colours, orange and black. Everywhere were scenes of wild and reckless gaiety. In the side streets, in the open squares, in the cafés, on every side confetti was thrown. The garçons de café, compelled to stand amid the continuous cross-fire that swept across the streets, had all assumed masks, and the roads and pavements soon

became an inch deep in confetti trodden to dust.

All along the line of the procession and in the thick of the fight bags of ammunition were offered by men, women or boys, who stood beside stalls or, mingling with the crowd, cried "*Bonbon; Bonbon!*" As Zertho and Liane walked together, pelting vigorously at a carriage containing three of their friends, an urchin came up to them crying, "*Bonbon!*" whereupon Liane, with a mischievous laugh, threw a handful of confetti straight at the crier, much to the urchin's discouragement.

"Come, let us follow the procession," Zertho suggested, and across the Place Massena they accompanied the corso, and down the gay streets until they entered the Place de la Préfecture, where the fun was at its height. The scene here presented was exceedingly picturesque. The band, which was really a band, and not merely a medley of ear-splitting, discordant noise which too frequently mars the Carnival, was the centre of attraction around which the maskers danced with wild abandon, joining hands and screaming with laughter. Liane, infected by the mad gaiety and as reckless as the rest, her domino whitened by the showers of confetti rained every moment upon it, plunged into the crowd of dancers and, hand-in-hand with Zertho, whirled round, laughing gleefully. The dancers made a human kaleidoscope of colour, framed by the amphitheatre-like tribunes, which were likewise filled with maskers, and made a setting as bright, and but one degree less animated, than the rollicking, ever-moving foreground.

From minute to minute the animation increased. Every street was aglow with colour, and the mêlée was general. Those seated in the tribunes made furious attacks upon those on foot, the latter retaliating with shower upon shower of pellets, until the battle became fierce in every quarter. Four occupants of a victoria, attired alike in pale blue dominoes, opened a vigorous fire upon Liane and Zertho as they passed, and received in return many scoopfuls of well-aimed confetti. But the pair were decidedly getting the worst of it, when suddenly a lithe little man in clown's dress of cheap lustrine joined Liane in the defence, and next instant received a handful of confetti full in his face. For an instant he felt in his pouch, but found his ammunition had given out. Then espying a stall a few yards away he rushed across with sudden impulse, flung down a couple of francs, caught up four large paper bags each containing several pounds of confetti, and flung them one after another at Liane's assailants. They were aimed with a sure hand, and as each struck the head or shoulders of one or other of the unfortunate occupants, the thin paper broke, completely smothering them with its contents. Yells of uproarious laughter arose at their discomfiture, and the coachman hastened his horses' speed.

Then turning to Liane, the man, evidently an honest, happy-hearted Niçois from his Italian accent, bowed gracefully, and with a smile said,—"*Mademoiselle, I believe we have taught them a lesson.*" Before she could thank him he was lost in the turbulent, laughing crowd.

And as Zertho passed gaily along at Liane's side, he sang softly to himself the refrain of "*L'Amoureuse,*"—the slightly risky parody, popular at that moment,—

"Voilà l'amoureuse,
À la démarch' voluptueuse,
Qui se pavan' soir et matin,
Avec des airs de p'tit trottin;
Voilà l'amoureuse,
À la demarch' voluptueuse,
Elle est joli' sacré matin!
Joli' comme un petit trottin!"

Gradually they fought their way back to the Place Massena, and found it a scene of brilliant colour, but the fight had now become so general that the very heavens seemed obscured by the confetti, which, on striking, crumbled into dense clouds of fine, white dust. The fanfares of the Chasseurs Alpains were sounding, the great effigy of the King was slowly moving across towards the leafy public garden, and the colossal figure of an ingenue was sailing along with the crowd with folded arms, perfectly pleased with herself and the Carnival world in general. Everyone here wore the wire mask and domino, even the vendors of confetti being compelled to assume grilles to protect their sun-tanned faces from their own wares.

The Carnival contagion had now spread to even the puppets and musicians themselves; for these left their lofty perches on the cars where they had been observed by all during the processions, and descending to earth, whirled among that motley crowd of dancers and of forms gigantic, gay and grotesque.

Although conflict and retaliation were the order of the day, and disorder the spirit supreme, to the credit of Nice and her crowds be it said that on such a day, when so many liberties were possible, were so few taken. The Mayor had caused a precautionary notice to be posted up, prohibiting any confetti being thrown at the police, gendarmes, or musicians, but even the gendarmes, usually an awe-inspiring, spick and span body, when threatened in fun, would reply, "*Fire away, your bullets don't hurt,*" and laughing defiance, would receive volley upon volley of the dusty pellets upon their dark uniforms without flinching, and laugh back defiantly.

Clowns, punchinelli, pierrots, furies, devils and ladies in dominoes fought with one another till every street in the neighbourhood of the Avenue de la Gare was swept from end to end by a hail of confetti, and Zertho and Liane trudged on through the thick dust into which it was every moment being trodden. Long "*serpentes*" of coloured paper, flung now and then, wrapped themselves about the lamp-posts and hung from windows and from the tall eucalypti, while from some of the houses the more enterprising showered upon the crowd thousands of small, advertising hand-bills. Those who, growing weary of the fight as the sun declined, sought shelter in the cafés, were quickly disillusioned, for from time to time disconcerting showers of pellets would sweep in at the open door, often falling into the bocks, mazagrans, and sirops, so that those who had had previous experience of Carnival ways sat with their wire vizors still down and their hands carefully covering their glasses.

On Confetti Day Carnival penetrates everywhere. In the streets, in the shops, in the churches, in the houses, the small pellets seem to enter by unknown means. They find their way down one's neck into one's boots, while ladies get their hats and hair filled with them and drop them wherever they tread. Confetti Day, apart from its interest and amusement as a brilliant spectacle, is the more remarkable because so many hundreds of human beings, prone to "envy, hatred, malice and all uncharitableness," begin, continue and end the fun, in such glorious good humour. Everywhere the battle raged fiercely, yet it was all in boisterous mirth, and laughter loud and sincere rang out alike from victor and from vanquished. Mirth ran riot, and disorder was everywhere, but spite was never shown.

Time after time, a storm of confetti swept about Liane and her escort, as together they passed along the colonnade, pelting and being pelted by every masker they met, until the dust came into her face through the grille, and the hood and trimming of her domino was full of grey pellets.

"You are tired and hot," Zertho exclaimed at last. "This dust makes one thirsty. Let us try and get to the Café de la Victoire."

To accomplish this, they were compelled to cross the broad place through the very thickest of the fray. Nevertheless, undaunted, with scoops ever in the sacks slung at their sides, they pressed forward, half-choked by the cross-fire of confetti through which they were passing. Liane's conical felt hat was dented and almost white, and her domino sadly soiled and tumbled, still with cheeks aglow by the exciting conflict, she went on, taking her own part valiantly. The wire masks did not completely disguise their wearers. Numbers of men and women she met she recognised, and where the recognition was mutual, the battle raged long and furiously, accompanied by screams of uproarious laughter.

At last they managed to reach the opposite side of the Place. The tables in the colonnade before the popular café were crowded with maskers who were endeavouring to get rid of the dust from their throats, notwithstanding the showers of pellets which continually swept upon them. The sun was sinking in a blaze of gold behind Antibes, the clock over the Casino marked a quarter to five; in fifteen minutes the cannon of the château would boom forth the signal for hostilities to cease, the musicians and puppets would mount upon the cars and move away, the maskers would remove their wire protectors, and order would reign once more.

Zertho and Liane had secured a table upon the pavement near the door, the interior of the café being suffocatingly crowded, and sipping their wine, were laughing over the desperate tussle of the afternoon, now and then retaliating when any passer-by directly assailed them. Suddenly a woman, looking tall in a domino of dark rose and wearing a half-mask of black velvet which completely disguised her features, flung, in passing, a large handful of confetti which struck Liane full upon the mask.

In an instant she raised her scoop, and with a gleeful laugh, sent a heavy shower into her unknown opponent's face. Like many other women, her assailant had apparently become separated from her escort in the fierce fighting, and the fact that she preferred a velvet mask to one of wire showed her to be not a little courageous. But Liane's well-directed confetti must have struck her sharply upon the chin, which remained uncovered, for it caused her to wince.

She halted, and standing in full view of the pair as if surveying them deliberately, next second directed another scoopful at them. Both Zertho and Liane, divining her intention, raised their hands to cover their masks, and as they did so the hail of pellets descended, many of them falling into their glasses.

"There," cried Liane, laughing gaily. "It's really too bad, she's spoilt our wine."

In a moment, however, Zertho, who had been preparing for this second onslaught, flung scoopful after scoopful at the intrepid woman, and several of those sitting at the tables around at once joined in repelling the fair masker's attack. Yet, nothing daunted, although smothered in confetti from a dozen different hands, she continued the conflict with the pair she had at first attacked, until Liane, in her eagerness to annihilate this woman who had so suddenly opened such a persistent and vigorous fire upon them, turned suddenly with her tin scoop filled to overflowing. With a loud laugh she flung it, but by accident the scoop itself slipped from her fingers, and struck the masker sharply upon the shoulder.

In an instant Liane, with a cry of regret, rose from her seat and rushed out into the roadway to apologise, but the unknown woman with a stiff bow, her dark eyes flashing angrily through the holes in her mask, turned away and walked quickly along the Rue Massena. Liane stooped, snatched up her scoop, and returned to where Zertho sat heartily laughing, those sitting around joining in a chorus of hilarity at the incident.

"She got a bigger dose than she bargained for," he exclaimed.

"I am sorry," she said. "It was quite an accident. But did you see her eyes? She glared as if she could kill me."

"Yes," he replied. "She looked half mad. However, she'll never be able to recognise you again."

Liane was silent. The light of joy and happiness had suddenly died out of her fair countenance. She seemed to possess some vague recollection of a similar pair of dark, flashing eyes. A face—a strange ghost of the past—came for an instant before her eyes; a thought flashed through her mind and held her appalled. She shuddered, pale as death behind her mask of gauze. Next instant, however, she laughed aloud at her fear. No, she assured herself, it could not be. It was only some faint resemblance, rendered the more vivid because it had come before her amid that reckless gaiety.

Then she smiled at Zertho again happily as before, and they ordered fresh wine, and waited until the cannon thundered from the heights above and the streets grew orderly, ere they started to walk home along the Promenade.

They had, however, been too far off the woman to overhear the strange ominous words she uttered when, with an

evil glint in her eyes, she turned from them abruptly with a fierce imprecation upon her lips, her cheeks beneath the velvet mask blanched with suppressed anger.

“No, I am not mistaken,” she had muttered in French, with a dry laugh between her set teeth. “When I met you dancing in the Place de la Préfecture I thought I recognised you, Liane Brooker. I followed, and threw at you in order to obtain a good view of your pretty face in which innocence is so well portrayed. Strange that we should meet again purely by accident; strange, too, that you should cover me with dust and fling your scoop into my face as though in defiance. Little do you dream how near I am to you, or of the ghastly nature of the revelation which I shall ere long disclose. Then the smiles which enchant your admirers will turn to tears, your merry laughter to blank despair, and your well-feigned innocence and purity to ignominy and shame.”

Chapter Eleven.

Monte Carlo.

Carnival's reign was ended. Pierrot, clown and columbine, hand in hand, had watched the flames consume him, and had danced around the dying embers. His palace had been torn down, the decorations in his honour had disappeared, the colours red and rose were no longer exhibited in the shop windows, for Nice had assumed her normal aspect of aristocratic dignity.

One afternoon a week afterwards, Liane reluctantly accompanied her father and Zertho to Monte Carlo.

When at luncheon the visit had been suggested by the Prince, she at once announced her intention of staying at home. Truth to tell, those great gaming-rooms with their wildly excited throngs possessed for her too many painful memories. At length, however, after much persuasion, she was induced to dress and accompany them.

She chose a white costume, with a large white hat relieved by violets, and a narrow belt of violet satin to match—a plain, fresh-looking gown which suited her beauty admirably, and within an hour they had ascended the steps of the great white Casino with its handsome façade, and entered the long bureau to exchange their visiting-cards for one of the pink cards of admission. The clerk at the counter, whose duty it is to examine the dress of the visitors and their cards, at once recognising the party, shook hands heartily with Brooker and the Prince, expressing pleasure at seeing them again.

“Yes, we've returned, you see,” the Captain answered jocularly. “Always back to Monte Carlo, you know.”

“Well, I wish messieurs all good fortune,” laughed the stout, round-faced man, “and also mademoiselle, of course,” he added, bowing, his face beaming with good humour, as instead of writing out formal admission cards he handed them three of the special white tickets issued by the Administration of the Cercle to its well-known habitués.

A gay cosmopolitan crowd in Paris-made gowns and well-cut suits, with bulky purses in their hands, struggled behind, eager to obtain tickets, therefore they at once deposited their sticks and sunshade, and passing across the great atrium, thronged with well-dressed people, approached the long polished doors guarded by attendants in bright livery of blue and gold. Here again one of the men wished the Captain “Good day,” the door opened, and they found themselves once more, after many months, inside the lofty well-remembered rooms where so many fortunes had been lost and won.

Down the vista from the entrance could be seen room after room, resplendent in gilt decorations, polished floors, ceiling of ornamental glass, and many beautiful paintings by Feyen, Perrin, and Jundt; each room filled with eager, anxious gamblers crowding around the oblong roulette-tables. The continual hum of voices, the jingle of coin, the rustle of notes, the click of the roulette-ball, and the monotonous cries of the croupiers combined to produce a veritable Babel of noise, while the heat on that bright sunny March afternoon seemed overpowering.

But those sitting around the tables, or standing behind, cared nothing for the world outside, too absorbed were they in the chance of the red or the black. The sun was excluded by blinds closely drawn, and the long windows were all curtained in black or blue muslin, with handsome patterns worked thereon, so that those walking upon the terrace by the blue sunlit sea could obtain no glimpse of what was going on within. The place was close, and there was about it that faint odour which it ever retains, the combined smell of perspiration and perfume.

From the moment Liane placed foot upon the polished floor she regretted that she had come. With that well-remembered scene before her a thousand bitter memories instantly surged through her brain. She hated herself. Around her as they approached the first table in the Moorish room were the same types of people that she knew, alas! too well; the flora of the Riviera, the world in which she had for years been compelled to live. Among those sitting around were men, weary and haggard-eyed, with those three deep lines across the brow which habitual gamblers so quickly develop, and heavy-eyed women who had concealed their paleness beneath their rouge. Of this class of frenzied humanity, she reflected, she herself was. There had been a time not long ago when she, too, had sat at the table prompting her father, sometimes flinging on coin or notes for him, dragging in his winnings with the little ebony rake, or keeping an account in her tiny memorandum book of the various numbers as they turned up, so as to assist him in his speculations.

Unlike these *déclassé* women, she hated play. The life was to her detestable. She had, it was true, moved in their world, but, thanks to her father's care, she had retained her goodness and purity, and had never been of it. Well she knew the terrible tension each spin of that little ivory roulette-ball caused among that eager crowd, an anxiety which furrowed the brows, which caused the hands to tremble, and sapped all youth and gaiety and life. She, although young and fair, had witnessed life there in its every aspect. She had herself experienced the terrible frenzy of excitement; she had felt the desperation of abject despair. She had seen dozens, nay hundreds, come there rich and

respected, to depart broken and ruined; she had witnessed more than one woman grow so desperate over her losses that she had fainted at the table, and once beside her at that very table there had sat a man, young, good-looking, and well-dressed, who lost and lost, and continued to lose throughout the long, hot day, until with a low imprecation he at length threw down his last hundred-franc note on the "impair." He lost, then rose unsteadily from the table, while half-a-dozen others struggled to obtain his place. An hour later she had risen and gone into the garden to obtain air, but scarcely had she walked a dozen yards when two attendants passed her by, carrying her fellow-gambler's lifeless form. He had shot himself.

This tragic incident, by no means uncommon, though so frequently hushed up, had so unnerved her that for many weeks her father could not induce her to enter the Casino, but gradually, because with a gambler's belief in talismans, he declared that when she accompanied him Fortune was always on his side, she again went with him, to spend long, anxious, breathless hours in the crowded place, where bright, happy girls staked their five-franc pieces, just for the purpose of saying they had done so, and rubbed shoulders with the most notorious of the *demi-monde*; and where honest men, professional gamblers, blackmailers and souteneurs all placed themselves on equal footing before the green-covered shrine of their fickle goddess.

Monte Carlo resembles nothing. It is at the same time a paradise and a hell, of hope and despair, of golden dreams and of hideous nightmares; a place without laws, either physical or moral. Its surroundings are delightful, nestling below the high bare Tête de Chien and the Mont de la Justice, with the picturesque little town of Monaco perched upon its bold prominent rock to the right, the green slopes of Cap Martin jutting out into the sea on the left, and away far in the distance, yet clearly defined, the purple Alps of Italy, while beyond the white-balustraded terrace is a broad open expanse of clear blue sea. The centre of elegance and corruption, of beauty and deformity, of wealth and vice, of refinement and sin, it is in itself unique.

On every hand, within and without the little place, the view is superb. In the fine square before the Casino the gardens are brilliant with flowers and shady with palms; the cafés overflow with visitors, waltz music sounds by night and day, and from noon till the early hours there is life and movement everywhere. The game fascinates, and the climate acts upon the organism of all who go there. The exquisitely beautiful surroundings of the Casino exert a deleterious influence. They are alluringly pleasant. Life seems so gay, happy and free amid that whirl of voluptuousness, where vice is disguised in a form *tout à fait charmante*, its banal influence so imperceptible, that the man who ventures into the Principality determined not to risk a single louis upon the *tapis-vert* in almost every case finds himself overwhelmed by that involuntary indolence which creeps upon all like an infernal intoxication, drawn irresistibly to the tables, and too often to his ruin. The daily life in Monaco presents a surprising picture of morals; a truly extraordinary Paradise of the marvellous and the diabolical, of the sublime and the terrible, of fair dreams and of hideous realities. *Et le fruit défendu dont se nourrit la masse a d'autant plus de saveur que le joli petit serpent auquel on doit sa découverte a toutes les allures mignonnes d'un démon tentateur extrêmement séduisant.*

To Erle Brooker, whose sole vice was that of gambling, the monotonous invitation of the croupiers, and the jingle of louis as they were tossed carelessly over to the winners, were as the sound of the hounds to the old hunter, or the bugle to the retired soldier. All the old longing for excitement and the hope for a run of luck came again upon him, and although he had vowed he would never again play he soon felt his pulse quicken and his good resolutions fading away. As, accompanied by Zertho and Liane, he moved on from table to table, watching the play and criticising it with the air of one with wide experience, the desire for risking a few louis came irresistibly upon him. He remembered that before leaving Nice he had placed ten one-hundred-franc notes in his pocket. It was a sum small enough, in all conscience, to risk. He recollected the time when, with Zertho standing behind him taking charge of his winnings, he had won a hundred times that amount between mid-day and midnight.

Of all that gay crowd Liane looked the prettiest and smartest. As she cast a rapid glance around the various tables, many of the men and women she recognised as professional fellow-gamblers, each with their little piles of silver, gold and notes. One or two, well-dressed and more prosperous, had, she knew, at one time been down to their very last franc. The two men also singled out old acquaintances, men who passed their days in these crowded rooms, nodded to them and remarked upon the sudden prosperity of some and the unusual seediness of others.

They were standing together closely watching the roulette at one of the centre tables. People were crowding four deep around it, but mostly the stakes were five-franc pieces, the minimum allowed.

"By Jove!" Zertho exclaimed at last, turning to the Captain. "See what a run the red is having!"

"Fourteen times in succession, m'sieur," observed a man at their elbow, consulting his card.

"It won't again. Watch," Brooker answered briefly, closely interested in the game.

Next moment the ball was sent spinning around outside the revolving disc of black and red; the croupier with sphinx-like countenance uttered his monotonous cry, "*Rien ne va plus!*" and after breathless silence the rattle told that the ivory had fallen. Brooker's prophecy proved correct. The black had gained.

"Going to risk anything?" inquired Zertho, with a smile.

"No," interrupted Liane earnestly. "Dad will not. He has already promised me."

The Captain, his hand trembling in his pocket, turned to his daughter with a smile.

"Surely you won't deprive him of winning a few louis?" Zertho exclaimed. "Be generous, just this once, dearest."

Smiling, she turned to her father with a glance of inquiry.

"I have promised," he observed quietly. "I do not break my pledge to you, unless with your permission."

Already the people, eager to tempt Fortune, were placing their money on the yellow lines upon the table, and while they spoke Zertho tossed a couple of louis upon the simple chance of the black. The game was made, black won, and he received back his stake with two louis in addition.

The sight of Zertho winning stirred Erle Brooker's blood. He had watched the run of the table sufficiently to know from experience that the chances were again in favour of the red, and with quick resolve he threw upon the scarlet diamond two notes for one hundred francs apiece.

Liane made a sudden movement to stay his hand, but too late. Then, with lips compressed she looked at him with bitter reproach, but uttered no word. The little ivory ball had already been launched on its way.

"*Rien ne va plus!*" cried the croupier an instant later, and the ball next second clicked into its socket.

Red won. The croupier tossed over to him two notes of the same value as those he had staked, and he took them up with an amused smile at his companions.

"Really, dad," cried Liane, pouting prettily, "it is too bad of you to break your promise. I only came with you on one condition, namely, that you wouldn't play."

"Well, I've won ten louis, so no great harm has been done," he answered.

"But there is harm," she protested firmly. "When once you come to the tables you cannot, you know, leave until you've won, or lost everything. I thought you had, for my sake, given it up."

They had drawn aside from the table, and were standing in the middle of the handsome room.

"This is only in fun, Liane," Zertho assured her. "We are neither of us any longer professionals. Our day is over."

"It is certainly not kind of you to invite my father to play like this," she exclaimed, turning upon him resentfully. "I have already told you that I do not wish him to play."

"I have not invited him," Zertho declared with a laugh. "If he chooses to follow the run I cannot well prevent it."

At that moment Brooker, who still kept his keen eyes riveted upon the table, heard the croupier's voice, hesitated a moment, and taking two rapid steps forward tossed upon the red diamond the four notes he had just picked up.

Whirr-r! click! went the ball again, and the croupier's announcement a few seconds later told him that he had won four hundred francs.

Liane, annoyed, flushed slightly, compressed her lips and turning from them with a gesture of anger walked straight out from the great gilded salons so hateful to her. As she passed, many turned and remarked how beautiful she was. She knew that the mania which had caused her father's downfall had returned, that this double success would cause him to plunge still more deeply. Zertho smiled contemptuously at her fears, and neither man went after her to induce her to return.

The Prince, on the contrary, shrugged his shoulders, and laughing said,—

"She's annoyed. She'll return in a minute or two, when she knows you've won. Now that she's gone I'm going to risk a little myself."

At that moment two players rose from their chairs, and the pair so well-known to the croupiers and attendants "marked" their places. The man sitting before the red and black disc which slowly revolved while the players laid down their coin, gave both men a little nod of recognition.

"*Messieurs, faites vos jeux,*" cried the croupier.

"What's your fancy? The impair?" Zertho inquired of his companion in the same tone as was his wont long ago.

"Of course," the other replied, selecting at the same moment three notes from those in his hand, and tossing them over upon the marked square indicated.

Once more sounded the monotonous cry, "*Rien ne va plus!*" The croupier sat immovable as one joyless, hopeless, and impassionate, a veritable machine raking in and paying out gold and silver and notes without caring one jot whether the bank gained or lost. The ball was an instant later sent on its way, and Brooker watching, saw it suddenly spring about and fall.

Again he won.

With one elbow resting upon the table he gathered up his winnings with that impassive manner which marks the professional gamester as one apart. Whether he gained or lost Erle Brooker never made sign, except sometimes when he lost more heavily than usual he would perhaps smile a trifle bitterly. Already the furrows were showing in his brow, and his deep-set eyes watched keenly the run of the game as time after time he would hesitate, apparently reflecting, until the ball was already in motion, and then toss his notes into the "manque" or "passe," the first being the numbers 1 to 18, and the latter 19 to 36, or place them upon the lines of the various numbered squares, whichever he deemed wisest for the composite chances of a "sixain," a "carré," a "douzaine," or a "colonne." Headless of all around him, heedless of his old partner at his side, the man who had once shared his losses and his winnings, heedless of the pale delicate girl who was wandering about alone somewhere outside, fearing lest he should lose the whole of the little money they now had, he won and won, and still won.

Sometimes he lost. Twice in succession the bank gained six hundred francs of his winnings; still nothing daunted, he continued, and found that the knowledge he had gained of the game proved true, for he won again and again, although sometimes doubling and even trebling his stake.

The crowd of eager ones around the table now began to wait until he selected the place whereon he should put down his stake, and commenced to follow his play narrowly, playing when he played, and refraining when he held back.

Zertho noticed this and whispered: "Your luck's changed, old chap. Why not try bigger stakes?"

"I know what I'm about," the other snapped viciously, pulling towards him a dozen notes from the "passe" opposite. "If you won't play yourself keep count for me, and see that I get fully paid."

Zertho well knew that his old partner had now become oblivious to everything. His mouth was hard-set, his eyes gleamed with a fierce excitement he strove to suppress, and great beads of perspiration stood upon his heavily-lined brow. A lady standing behind him, a tourist evidently, reached over his head to stake her modest five-franc piece on the red, whereupon he turned, and muttering something uncomplimentary regarding "those women who ought to play for sous," withered her with a look.

Somebody had handed Zertho one of the cards printed with parallel columns under the letters "N" and "R," with a pencil wherewith to keep count. He glanced up, and noticing all eyes directed upon them, suddenly reflected that if any person came up who knew him as Prince Zertho d'Auzac it would scarcely be dignified to be discovered counting the gains and acting as clerk to a professional gamester.

But Brooker wanted money badly, and was winning; therefore he could not disturb him. Both men were gamblers at heart, and the one feared to move just as much as the other, lest the spell should be broken and the luck change.

The good fortune attending the Captain's play seemed to the onlookers little short of marvellous. With apparent unconcern he flung down his notes, sometimes six or ten twisted carelessly together, and each time there came back towards him upon the point of the croupier's rake his own notes with a similar number of others.

Suddenly, having thrown four notes upon the "manque," he rested his hot whirling brow upon his hand. The ball clicked into its little numbered partition, the croupier announced that the number 20 had gained, and he knew he had lost. The excited crowd sitting and standing around the table exchanged smiles and glances, and at that moment the croupiers changed.

Again the game was made, and the man upon whom everyone's eyes were turned threw five hundred francs upon the simple chance of the red. Black again won.

Once more he threw a similar sum upon the red. A third time black won. He had lost fourteen hundred francs in three spins of the wheel!

It seemed that his luck had suddenly departed. It is often remarked by professional gamesters that luck departs from the fortunate when the croupiers are changed.

But the passion was now full upon him. His face was rigid; his mouth tightly closed. He had spoken no word to Zertho, and had seemed hardly to notice how much his companion had been gathering into his hands, or to take the trouble to glance at the revolving roulette. The croupier's voice was, for him, sufficient.

Now, each time that the tiny ball dropped into its socket he knew that its click cost him four hundred francs. Time after time he lost, and those who, half-an-hour before, had been carefully following his play and winning heavily thereby, began to forsake him and trust in their own discretion. In eighteen games only twice the red turned up, still with the dogged pertinacity of the gamester he pinned his faith to the colour upon which he had had his run of luck, and continued to stake his notes in the expectation that the black must lose.

"You're getting reckless," Zertho whispered. "This isn't like you, old fellow."

But his companion turned from him with angry gesture, and flung on his money as before.

At that moment red won. The colour had changed. From Zertho's hand he took the bundle of notes, still formidable, although his losses had been so heavy, and counted them as quickly and accurately as a bank-teller. There were eighty-three, each for one hundred francs.

For an instant he paused. Already the ball was on its way. His keen eyes, gleaming with an unnatural fire, took in the table at a glance; then withdrawing twenty-three of the notes, he screwed up the remainder into a bundle and tossed it upon the scarlet diamond.

"Good heavens!" Zertho gasped. "Are you mad, Brooker?"

But the Captain paid no heed. His blotchy countenance, a trifle paler, was as impassive as before, although he had staked six thousand francs, the maximum allowed upon the simple chance.

"*Rien ne va plus!*" cried the croupier once more, and those crowding around the table, witnessing the heavy stake, glanced quickly at the reckless gamester, then craned their necks to watch the tiny ball.

Slowly, very slowly, it lost its impetus. The breathless seconds seemed hours. All were on tiptoe of expectation, the least moved being the man sitting with his chin resting upon his hand, his eyes fixed thoughtfully upon the table before him; the man who had spent whole years of his life amid that terrible whirl of frenzied greed and forlorn hope. Even the croupiers, whose dark, impassive faces and white shirt-fronts had haunted so many of the ruined ones, bent

to watch the progress of the ball.

Zertho, in his eagerness, rose from his chair to obtain a better view.

Whirr-r. Click! It fell at last, and scarcely had it touched the number when the croupier's voice clearly and distinctly announced that the red had gained. Then the crowd breathed once more.

Brooker raised his head in the direction of the croupier, and a slight smile played about the corners of his hard-set mouth. A moment later six notes for a thousand francs each were handed to him at the end of the rake, while Zertho drew in the big bundle of small notes his companion had staked. Brooker had re-won all the winnings he had lost.

He toyed with the bundle of sixty notes which Zertho handed to him until the ball was again set spinning, when, as if with sudden resolution, he tossed them once more upon the same spot.

A silent breathlessness followed, while he remained still motionless, his chin sunk upon his breast. It was a reckless game he was playing, and none knew it better than himself. Yet somehow that afternoon a desperate frenzy had seized him, and having won, he played boldly, with the certain knowledge that the bad luck which had hitherto followed him had at last changed.

Again the disc, revolving in the opposite direction, sent the ball hopping about as it struck it. Once more it fell.

The red again won, and he added six additional notes to the six already in his hand.

"Messieurs, faites vos jeux!"

A third time was the game made, a third time he held in his hand in indecision that bundle of notes, and a third time he tossed them upon the scarlet diamond.

In an instant gold and notes were showered upon them from every hand until they formed a formidable pile. The other players crowding around, seeing his returning run of luck, once more followed his game.

A third time was the ball projected around the edge of the disc, followed eagerly in its course by two hundred eyes; a third time the croupier's voice was raised in warning that no more money was to be placed upon the table, and a third time the ivory dropped with a sudden click upon the red.

A third time came the six thousand francs handed upon the end of the croupier's rake.

Brooker, taking the bundle of small notes and thrusting them all together in his pocket, rose at once from the table with a smile at those opposite him, the richer by a thousand pounds.

"Marvellous!" cried Zertho, as they moved away together across the polished floor. "What a run you've had! Surely Liane can't be angry now. Let's go into the gardens; she's certain to be awaiting us there."

And together they went to the cloakroom for their hats; then passed out down the broad carpeted steps into the pretty place, where the shadows were lengthening. The Monégasques and visitors were promenading in the gardens; the orchestra before the crowded Café de Paris, with its striped sun-blinds, was playing an overture of Mascagni's; and the cool, bright, flower-scented air was refreshing after the heat and excitement of the crowded rooms.

"At last!" Brooker exclaimed, as they descended the steps to seek Liane. "At last my luck has changed!"

Chapter Twelve.

Liane's Secret.

When Liane had left the two men she first obtained her sunshade, then, descending the steps, walked slowly beneath the shadows round to the front of the Casino and out upon the beautiful broad terrace, flanked by palms, aloes and flowers, which faced the sea. There were but few promenaders, for the sun was still warm, and most of the people were inside tempting Fortune.

With her white sunshade above her head she leaned upon the stone balustrade, her clear eyes fixed in deep thought upon the wide expanse of blue sky and bluer sea. On the terrace below, where a pigeon-shooting match was in progress, the crack of a gun was heard at intervals, while pacing the gravelled walk near her was one of the Casino attendants with the curious closely-fitting coat and conspicuous broad striped belt of red and blue. The duty of these men is somewhat unique. They watch the loungers narrowly, and if they appear plunged in despair they eject them from the gardens lest they should commit suicide.

The soft breeze from the sea fanned her face refreshingly after the closeness of those crowded rooms, where the sun's brightness was excluded, and the light of the glorious day subdued. She was annoyed at Zertho's action in inciting her father by winning the paltry couple of louis, more than at the Captain for his want of self-control. She stood there thinking, a tall lithe figure in white girdled with violet, refined, exquisite, dainty from the gilt ferrule of her sunshade to the tip of her tiny white kid shoe. She reflected what terrible fascination the tables possessed for her father, and was half inclined to forgive him, knowing how irresistible was the temptation to play amid that accumulation of all the caprices, of all the fantasies, of all the eccentricities, of all the idleness, of all the ambitious and all the indiscretions. But Zertho's contemptuous smile had added to her vexation and displeasure.

Her father had commenced playing, and she dreaded the consequences, knowing with what dogged persistency he

would stake his last louis on the chance of regaining his losses, heedless of the fact that for each coin lost they would be deprived of the comforts of life to that amount. She reproached herself for consenting to accompany them, but as she pondered her anger soon turned to poignant sorrow. She had believed that her father, hard hit as he had been, had relinquished all thought of play. Time after time he had assured her that he had renounced roulette for ever, yet now on the first occasion he had revisited the scene of his old triumphs and defeats, all his good resolutions had crumbled away, and he had tossed his money into the insatiable maw of the bank as recklessly as he had ever done. She sighed as she thought of it, and bitter tears dimmed her vision. By her own influence she could have taken him away; it was, she knew, the fear of Zertho's derision that caused him to fling those notes so defiantly upon the table.

With that picturesque, well-remembered landscape of rugged mountain heights, olive-clad slopes, and calm sea, memories sad and bitter continued to crowd upon her. This place, among the fairest on earth, was to her the most hateful and loathsome. With it were associated all the evil days which had passed so drearily; all the poverty which had kept her and her dead companion shabby and heavy-hearted; all the months of anxiety and weariness in days when their rooms were poorly furnished and the next meal had been an event of uncertainty. A few months of life at a good hotel, amid congenial society, would always be followed by many months of residence high up in some back street, where the noise was eternal, where the screaming of loud-voiced Frenchwomen sounded above and below, where clothes were hung upon the drab jalousies to air in the sun, and where the smell of garlic came in at the windows. In such a life the quiet English homeliness of Stratfield Mortimer had come as a welcome rest. She had loved their quaint old ivied cottage, and had fondly believed they would remain there always, happy and contented. But, alas! Nelly's tragic end had changed it all.

Zertho, her reckless but animated companion of the old days, was back again with them, and once more they were upon the very spot that she had vowed so often she would never again revisit.

These reflections brought with them thoughts of Nelly. She recollected how, often and often, they would stroll together along that terrace while Zertho and her father sat hour after hour at the tables, regardless of meal-times, and how sometimes, hungry and having no money, they would go in and obtain from one or other of the men a ten-franc piece with which to get their dinner at the cheap little restaurant they knew of down in La Condamine. It was upon that very gravelled walk, with its inviting seats, high palms, and banks of flowers, that they had one afternoon passed a tall, good-looking young Englishman not much older than themselves. He had smiled at them, and they, always delighted at the chance of an innocent flirtation, had laughed in return. He had then raised his hat, spoken to them, and strolled along at Nellie's side. His name was Charles Holroyde, and it was he who, a few weeks later, had given Nelly the costly brooch which had been stolen from her throat by her assassin.

She glanced at the seat beside which she was standing. It was the one on which they had sat that sunny afternoon when they chatted merrily, and he had first given the two girls his card. She sighed. Those days were passed, and even Nelly, her companion and confidante, was no more. She was, she reflected gloomily, without a single real friend.

At that moment, however, she felt a light hand upon her shoulder behind her, and a voice exclaimed,—

"Liane! At last!"

She turned quickly with a start, and next instant found herself face to face with George Stratfield.

"You, George!" she gasped, her face blanching.

"Yes, darling," he answered. "I called at your address at Nice, but they told me you had come over here, so I followed. But what's the matter?" he asked, in consternation. "You are not well. How white you look! Tell me what is worrying you?"

"Nothing," she answered, with a forced laugh. "Nothing whatever, I assure you. I—I wasn't aware that I looked at all pale. Your sudden appearance startled me."

But George regarded her with suspicion. He knew from the look of intense anxiety upon her fair countenance that she was concealing the truth.

"Is the Captain with you?" he inquired after an awkward pause.

"Yes, he is inside," she answered. "But why have you come here?"

"To see you, Liane," he said, earnestly. "I could no longer bear to be parted from you, so one night I resolved to run out and spend a week or so in Nice, and here I am."

Her face had assumed a strange, perplexed look. He knew nothing of Zertho's existence, for loving him so well she had hesitated day by day to write and tell him the hideous truth. She saw that he must now know all.

She raised her clear, wonderful eyes to his as she stammered a question, asking if that was his first visit to the Riviera.

"Yes," he answered, gazing around at the Casino, the mountains, and the sea. "How charming it is here. I don't wonder that you are so fond of it."

"I'm not fond of it?" she protested, with a sigh. "I would rather be in England—much rather."

"Yet you are half-French yourself! Surely this is gayer and much more pleasant than Stratfield Mortimer," he exclaimed, leaning with his back to the balustrade, glancing at her elegant dress, and noticing how well it suited her.

"The surroundings are perhaps more picturesque," she replied, turning her gaze sea-ward. "But I was far happier

there than here," She sighed and the little gloved hand holding her sunshade trembled.

"Why?" he inquired surprised.

For an instant she raised her eyes to his, then lowering her gaze, answered,—

"Why do you ask? Did I not then have you?"

"But I am here now," he said quickly. "I must, however, admit that your welcome was scarcely as cordial as I expected."

Her lips tightened, and she swallowed the lump rising in her throat.

"I—I cannot kiss you here, in a public place," she said, with a little gesture of regret.

The strange coldness about her voice caused him dismay. It proved that the apparent apathy of her letters actually arose from indifference. His suspicions were correct. Her love had grown cold.

A heavy look of disappointment crossed his face, as pausing a moment, he glanced at her, and saw that she shivered.

"Come," he exclaimed. "You have, I believe, stood here too long. The breeze is perhaps chilly. Let us walk."

"I'm not cold at all," she assured him, without moving.

"Except towards me," he observed, gloomily.

"I wasn't aware that my attitude was one of indifference," she said, endeavouring to smile.

"There is a change in you, Liane," the young man declared, gazing seriously into her eyes. "Tell me, darling, what has occurred."

She held her breath for a moment. She loved him dearer than life, yet she feared to speak the truth lest he should turn from her and renounce her as an enchantress false and unworthy. Her countenance was almost pale as the dress she wore, and her breast rose and fell convulsively.

"Nothing," she answered at last. "Nothing has occurred."

"But you are not bright and happy as you used to be," he declared sympathetically. "Something troubles you. Confide in me, darling."

She turned her face from him and tears slowly coursed down her cheeks. But she made no response. Together they walked several times the whole length of the terrace, and their conversation drifted to other topics. He told her of his bachelor life in London, his lonely, dreary chambers, of his desperate struggle to secure a foothold in his already overcrowded profession, and of his good fortune in obtaining a little book-reviewing for a weekly paper.

"Now, what distresses you, Liane?" he asked at last, when again they were standing against the parapet gazing over the sea. "Surely I may know?"

"No," she murmured. "No, George, you cannot."

"Do you fear to trust me—the man who loves you?" he asked in a reproachful tone, grasping her hand.

"Ah!" she cried with sudden emotion, "do not make my burden heavier to bear, George. Why have you come here to me—now?"

"Why now? Are you not pleased that I should be beside you when you are unhappy?"

"Yes—I mean no," she sobbed. "Your presence here only adds to my torture."

"Torture?" he echoed. "What do you mean, Liane?"

"I must tell you now," she gasped, clutching his arm convulsively, and raising her tearful face to his with an imploring look. "You will not think me false, cruel and heartless—will you? But I cannot marry you."

"What!" he ejaculated, starting and regarding her in abject dismay. "Why, what is there to prevent it? Surely you cannot say that you no longer love me?"

"Ah! no," she answered, panting, her gloved hand still clutching his arm. "I do love you, George. I swear I love you at this moment as no other woman ever can."

"Yet you cannot marry me?"

"It is impossible."

"Ah! don't say that, darling," he protested. "We love each other too well ever to be parted."

"But we must part," she answered, in a blank, despairing voice. "You must no longer think of me, except as one who has loved you, as one who will still think often, very often, of you."

"Impossible!" he cried quickly. "You told me once that you loved me, that you would wait a year or so if necessary, and that you would marry me."

"I know! I know!" she wailed, covering her face with her hands. "And I told you the truth."

"Then you have met someone else whom you love better," he observed, in a tone of poignant sorrow.

She did not reply. Her heart was too full for words. Her breath came in short, quick gasps, and she laid one hand upon the stone balustrade to steady herself.

"Ah, George," she murmured brokenly, "you do not know the fatality that of late has encompassed me, or you would not reproach me. You would pity me."

He saw she was trembling. Her eyes were downcast, her chin had fallen upon her breast.

"I cannot sympathise with you, or advise you, if you will not tell me the cause of your distress," he said in a kindly tone, grasping her hand.

They were in the eastern end of the garden, at a spot but little frequented.

"I know you must hate me for having deceived you like this, but truly I could not avoid it. Many, many times have I striven to write to you and tell you the truth, but my words looked so cold, formal and cruel on paper that I always tore up the letter. While you were in ignorance I knew that you still loved me, but now—"

"Well, I am still in ignorance," he interrupted.

"And I have lost you!" she cried despairingly.

"Why? I still love you."

"But I must not—I dare not think of love again!" she whispered hoarsely. "From to-day we must part. You must go away and let us both try and forget all that has passed between us. If I have acted cruelly, forgive me. It was because I have been so weak—because I loved you so well."

"No," he answered firmly, "I shall not leave you, dearest. I love you still as fondly as in the old days when we strolled together around Stratfield; therefore you shall not send me away like this."

"But you must go," she cried. "You must go; I am betrothed."

"Betrothed?"

The colour died from his face. She hung her head, and her breast rose and fell quickly.

"Ah!" she cried, "do not hate me, George. Do not think that I have been false to you. It is not my fault; I swear it is not. A fate, cruel and terrible has overwhelmed me."

For a moment he stood rigid as one transfixed.

"What is the man's name?" he inquired at last, in a hard, strained tone.

She stood silent for several moments, then slowly, without raising her head, answered,—

"Zertho."

"His surname, I mean," he demanded.

"Prince Zertho d'Auzac," she replied, in a low, faltering voice.

He knit his brows. The title was to him sufficient proof that the woman he loved so dearly had forsaken him in order to obtain wealth and position. She would be Princess d'Auzac. It was the way of the world.

"And why have you kept the truth from me?" he demanded, in a harsh tone full of reproach.

"Because I feared you—because—because I loved you, George," she sobbed.

"Love!" he echoed. "Surely you cannot love me if you can prefer another?"

"Ah! no," she cried in protestation. "I knew you would misjudge me; you whom I loved so dearly and still love."

"Then why marry this man, whoever he is?" he interrupted fiercely. He saw her words were uttered with an intense earnestness. There still burned in her eyes the unmistakable light of fond passion. "Because I must."

"You must? I don't understand."

Her cold lips moved, but no sound came from them. In vain she tried to suppress the fierce tumult of feelings that raged within her breast. He was endeavouring to wring her secret from her! the secret of Zertho's influence. No, he should never know. It was terrible, horrible; its very thought appalled her. To save her father from exposure, disgrace, and something worse she was compelled to renounce her love, sacrifice herself, and marry the man she despised and hated.

"I have promised to marry the Prince d'Auzac because I am compelled," she said briefly, in a low, firm voice.

"What renders it imperative?" he demanded, his face dark and serious.

"My own decision," she answered, struggling to remain calm.

"You have decided, then, to discard my love," he said fiercely. "You prefer being the wife of a Prince rather than of a struggling barrister. Well, perhaps, after all your choice is but natural."

"I do not prefer," she declared, passionately. "Cannot you see, George, that there are circumstances which compel me to act as I am acting? Heaven knows, I have suffered enough, because you are the only man I can love."

"Then why not remain mine, darling?" he said, more tenderly, with a slight pressure of her hand as he gazed with intense earnestness into her tear-dimmed eyes. "We love one another, therefore why should both our lives be wrecked?"

"Because it is imperative," she answered, gloomily.

"But what motive can you have in thus ruining your future, and casting aside all chance of happiness?" he inquired, puzzled.

"It is to secure my future, not to ruin it, that I have promised to marry the Prince," she answered.

"And for no ulterior motive?"

"Yes," she faltered. "There is still another reason."

"What is it? Tell me."

"No, George," she answered in a low, hoarse voice. "Do not ask me, for I can never tell you—never."

"You have a hidden motive which you refuse to explain," he observed resentfully. "I have placed faith in you; surely you can trust me, Liane!"

"With everything, save that."

"Why?"

"It is a secret which I cannot disclose."

"Not even to me?"

"No, not even to you," she answered, pale to the lips. "I dare not!"

He remained silent in perplexity. A bevy of bright-faced, laughing girls passed them in high spirits, counting as they went by the coin they had won at the tables. Liane turned her face from them to hide her emotion, and stood motionless, leaning still upon the balustrade. The sun was sinking behind the great dark rock whereon was perched Monaco, and the mountains were already purple in the mystic light of evening.

"Why are you so determined that we should separate, darling?" he asked, in a low, pained voice, bending down towards her averted face. "Surely your Prince can never love you as devotedly as I have done!"

"Ah! George," she cried, with a tender passion in her glance as she again turned to him, "do not tempt me. It is my duty, and I have given a pledge. I have never loved Prince Zertho, and I never shall. Mine will be a marriage of compulsion. In a few short weeks I shall bid farewell to hope and happiness, to life and love, for I shall become Princess d'Auzac and lose you for ever."

"As Princess you may obtain many of the pleasures of life. Far more than if you were my wife," he observed, in a hollow tone, as if speaking to himself.

"No, no," she protested. "The very name is to me synonymous of all that is hateful. Ah! you do not know, George, the terrible thoughts that seem to goad me to madness. Often I find myself reflecting whether death would not be preferable to the life to which I am now condemned. Yet I am held to it immutably, forced against my will to become this man's wife, in order that the terrible secret, which must never be disclosed, may still remain where it is, locked in the breast of the one man who, by its knowledge, holds me irrevocably in his power."

"Then you fear this Prince Zertho?" he said slowly, with deep emphasis. She seemed quite unlike the laughing, happy girl he had known at home in their quiet rural village. Her strange attitude of abject dejection and despair held him stupefied.

"Yes," she answered hoarsely, after a long pause, "I dare not disobey him."

"From your words it would seem that your crime is of such a terrible nature that you dare not risk exposure. Is that so?" he hazarded in a hard voice, scarcely raised above a whisper.

"My crime!" she cried, all colour instantly dying out of her handsome face, while in her clear, grey eyes was a strange expression as if she were haunted by some fearsome spectre of the past. Her white lips quivered, her hands trembled, "What do you mean?" she gasped. "What do you know of my crime?"

Next instant she started, her lips held tight together as she drew herself up unsteadily with a sudden movement.

She knew that she had involuntarily betrayed herself to the man she loved.

Chapter Thirteen.

Lip-Salve.

In a room on the second floor of an old, high, dingy-looking house in one of the dingiest back streets near the flower-market in Nice sat a man and a woman. The room was lofty, with a ceiling which had once been painted but had now faded and fallen away in great flakes, while the furniture was frayed and shabby. The shutters of the two long windows were closed, and the place was lit by a cheap shaded lamp suspended in the centre, its light being too dim to sufficiently illuminate the whole apartment. Beneath the circle of light stood a table marked in squares, and in its centre a roulette-wheel.

The man, lying lazily back in an armchair, smoking a long cigar, was about thirty-five, dark, with well-cut aquiline features, in which craft and intelligence were combined, a small pointed moustache, and a pair of keen black eyes full of suspicion and cunning. His companion was old, perhaps sixty, lean, ill-attired and wizened, her face being almost brown as a toad's back, her body bent, and her voice weak and croaking.

They sat opposite to one another, talking. Around the walls there were tacked copies of a leaflet headed, in huge black capitals, "The Agony of Monte Carlo," which declared that the advertiser, an Englishman who offered his services to the public, had vanquished the hazard, and was the only person who could gain indefinitely at either roulette or trente-et-quarante. He had solved the puzzling problem of "How to Win."

The French in which the circular was printed was not remarkable for its grammar or diction, but it was certainly a brilliant specimen of advertisement, and well calculated to entrap the unwary. Copies of it had for several weeks been widely distributed in the streets of Nice, flung into passing cabs, or handed to those who took their daily airing on the Promenade, and it had given rise to a good deal of comment. Among many other remarkable statements, it was alleged that the discoverer of this infallible method had gained five hundred francs an hour upon an ordinary capital of five francs, and so successful had been his play that the Administration of the Casino, in order to avert their own ruin, had denied him any further card of admission. The remarkable person declared further that so certain was he of success that he was prepared to place any stake against that of any person who doubted, and to allow the player to turn the roulette himself. To those who arranged to play under his direction the circular promised the modest gain of one million two hundred thousand francs a month! Truly the remarkable circular was aptly headed "The Agony of Monte Carlo."

The inventor was the dark-eyed man with the cigar, and it was upon the table before him that he gave illustrations of his marvellous discovery to his clients. All the systems of Jacquard, Yaucanson, Fulton, Descartes and Copernic were declared to be mere jumbles of false principles, and held up to derision. This was actually infallible. Nice had heard of a good many methods of winning before, but never one put forward by an inventor sufficiently confident to offer to bear the losses; hence, from the hours of ten to twelve, and two to six, the foppishly-attired man who declared in his circular, "*Je mis la force, parceque je suis la vérité,*" was kept busy instructing amateur gamblers how to act when at Monte Carlo, and receiving substantial fees for so doing.

The clocks had chimed ten, and the street was quiet. The old woman, who with difficulty had been reading the feuilleton in the *Petit Niçois* yawned, flung down her paper, and glanced over at the cosmopolitan adventurer who, with his head thrown back, was staring at the ceiling, humming in a not unmusical voice the catchy refrain of Varney's popular "Sérénade du Pavé—"

"Sois bonne, O ma chère inconnue,
Pour qui j'ai si souvent chanté!
Ton offrande est la bienvenue,
Fais-moi la charité!
Sois bonne, O ma chère inconnue,
Pour qui j'ai souvent chanté!
Devant moi, devant moi
Sois la bienvenue?"

So light-hearted he seemed that possibly he had succeeded in inventing some other system whereby the pockets of the long-suffering public might be touched. Suddenly a footstep on the landing outside caused them both to start and exchange quick glances. Then the bell rang, and the conqueror of the hazard rose and opened the door.

Their visitor was Zertho. He was in evening clothes, having left the theatre early to stroll round there.

"Well, Mother Valentin," he exclaimed in French, tossing his hat carelessly upon the table, and sinking into a chair. "Rheumatism still bad—eh?"

"Ah, yes, m'sieur," croaked the old woman in the Provençal patois, "still very bad," and grunting, she rose, and hobbled out of the room.

"And how's business?" Zertho inquired of the other.

"Pretty fair. Lots of mugs in the town just now," he smiled, speaking in Cockney English.

"That handbill of yours is about the cheekiest bit of literature I've ever come across," he said, nodding towards one of the remarkable documents tacked upon the wall.

"It has drawn 'em like honey draws flies," said the other, smiling and regarding it with pride. "The offer to pay the losses does it. You can always make a lie truth by lying large enough."

He had resumed his seat, and was puffing contentedly at his cigar.

"It's a really marvellous specimen of bluff," Zertho observed, in a tone of admiration. "When I first saw it I feared that you had been a bit too extravagant in your promises."

"The bigger your promise the greater your success. I've always found it the same with all the wheezes I've worked," he replied. "I saw you driving with Brooker's daughter a few days ago. You seem to be having an uncommonly good time of it," he added.

"Can't complain," Zertho said, leaning back with a self-complacent air. "Patrician life suits me after being so many years an outsider."

"No doubt it is pleasant," his companion answered with a meaning look, "if one can completely bury the past."

"I have buried it," Zertho answered quickly.

Max Richards, the inventor of "The Agony of Monte Carlo," regarded the man before him with a supercilious smile. "And you pay me to prevent its exhumation—eh?"

"I thought we had agreed not to mention the matter again," Zertho exclaimed, darting at his crafty-looking fellow-adventurer a look of annoyance and suspicion.

"My dear fellow," answered the other quite calmly, "I have no desire to refer to it. If you are completely without regret, and your mind is perfectly at ease, well, I'm only too happy to hear it. I have sincere admiration, I assure you, for a man who can forget at will. I wish I could."

"I do not forget," Zertho snapped. "Your confounded demands will never allow me to forget."

The thin-faced man smiled, lazily watching the smoke ascend from an unusually good weed.

"It is merely payment for services rendered," he observed. "I'm not the lucky heir to an estate, therefore I can't afford to give people assistance gratis."

"No," cried Zertho in a tumult of anger at the remembrance of recent occurrences. "No, you're an infernal blackmailer!"

Richards smiled, quite undisturbed by his visitor's sudden ebullition of wrath, and, turning to him said,—

"My dear fellow, whatever can you gain by blackguarding me? Why, every word you utter is in self-condemnation."

Zertho was silent. Yes, it was the truth what this man said. He was a fool to allow his anger to get the better of him. Was it not Napoleon who boasted that the success of all his great schemes was due to the fact that he never permitted his anger to rise above his throat?

His face relaxed into a sickly smile.

"I'm weary of your constant begging and threatening," he said at last. "I was a fool in the first instance. If I had allowed you to speak no one would have believed you. Instead of that, I generously gave you the money you wanted."

"I'm glad you say 'generously'," his companion observed, smiling. "Generosity isn't one of your most engaging characteristics."

"Well, I've been generous to you—too generous, for you have now increased your demands exorbitantly."

"I'm poor—while you can afford to pay."

"I can't—I won't afford," retorted Zertho, determinedly. "When men grow wealthy they are always imposed upon by men such as you," he added. "I admit that the service you rendered deserved payment. Well, I liquidated the debt honourably. Then you immediately levied blackmail, and have ever since continued to send me constant applications for money."

"A man who can afford to forget his past can afford to be reminded of the debt he owes," answered the man, still smoking with imperturbable coolness.

"But I tell you I won't stand it any longer. You've strained the cord until it must now snap."

"Very well, my dear fellow," answered the other, with an air of impudent nonchalance. "You know your own business best. Act as you think fit."

"I shall. This is my last visit here."

"No doubt. My present wheeze is getting about played out. A good thing like this can't run for any length of time. In a

week, for obvious reasons, I shall lock up the doors and depart with Mother Valentin, leaving the landlord looking for his rent and my clients thirsting for my vitals. Yes, you are right, my dear Zertho, when you say this will be your last visit here. But if the mountain will not come to Mahomet, the latter must go to the mountain. I may, perhaps, call upon you, my dear Zertho."

"No, you sha'n't. I shall give orders that you are not to be admitted."

"You will scarcely do that, I think," he answered, still smiling. The whole bearing of the man betrayed confidence in his position.

"But I tell you I will. I have come here to-night in fulfilment of your demand. It is, however, the last time that we shall meet."

"I hope so."

"Why?"

"I hope that you'll pay me a sum sufficient to obviate the necessity of us meeting again. I assure you that the pleasure of your company is not unmixed with dislike."

"It is mutual," Zertho snapped, annoyed at the man's unmitigated insolence. "I'll pay you nothing more than what you demanded in your letter yesterday," and taking from his pocket a wallet of dark-green leather with silver mountings, he counted out four five-hundred-franc notes, and tossed them angrily upon the table, saying, "Make the best of them, for you won't get another sou from me."

The man addressed stretched out his hand, took the notes, smoothed them out carefully, and slowly placed them in his pocket.

"Then we are enemies?" he observed at last, after a long pause. He looked straight into Zertho's face.

"Enemies or friends, it makes no difference to me. It does not alter my decision."

His companion slowly knocked the ash from his cigar, then continued smoking in silence.

"Well, you don't speak," exclaimed Zertho, impatiently, at last, twirling his dark moustache. "What is your intention?"

"I never show my hand to my opponent, my dear fellow," was the quick retort. "And I know you are never unwise enough to do so."

Zertho had his match in this *chevalier d'industrie*, and was aware of it.

"You think I'm still in fear?" he said.

"I don't know; neither do I care," the other answered. "If you don't pay me there are others who no doubt will."

Zertho sprang quickly from his chair with a look of murderous hatred in his dark face and flashing eyes. "You would still threaten me!" he said between his teeth. "You taunt me because you believe I am entirely in your hands."

"I do not believe," the other replied with cool indifference. "I know."

"You are an infernal scoundrel!"

"I might pass a similar compliment," he said. "But I see no reason why the pot should comment unfavourably upon the blackness of the kettle. I'm merely assisting you to obtain a pretty wife—a wife, by Heaven, too pure and good and beautiful for any such as you, and—"

"What do you mean?" Zertho interrupted with a start. This man evidently knew more than he had suspected. "You are not assisting me in the least."

But Richards laughed aloud, and with a deprecatory wave of the hand, replied,—

"It's no good to bluff me. I know it is your intention to marry Liane Brooker, whose beauty is so admired everywhere, and who is as good as she's pretty. I happen to know something of her—more, perhaps, than you think. Well, only by my assistance can you obtain her. Therefore, you won't be such an idiot as to quarrel with me."

"I do not quarrel," Zertho answered in a much more conciliatory tone. "I only protest against your infernal taunts and insolence."

"Then the matter resolves itself into a simple one—a mere question of price."

"I refuse to treat with you."

"Then you will not marry Liane. She will be spared the misery of becoming Princess d'Auzac."

"Misery!" he echoed. "I can give her wealth, position—everything which makes a woman happy."

"I doubt whether any woman can be happy with a man whose conscience is overshadowed, like yours," his companion observed. "Why, her face would remind you hourly of that which you must be ever striving to forget."

"What does it matter to you?" he snarled. "I shall marry her."

"Then before doing so you will pay me for my services. Your stroke is a bold one, Zertho, but remember that you can marry her only through me. It is worth a good sum to obtain such a beautiful wife."

"Whatever it may be worth, you'll never get it," d'Auzac declared determinedly.

The two men faced each other.

"In which case she will be enabled to release herself," observed the inventor of the infallible system.

"Who will suffer, then? Why you, yourself." Zertho stood leaning upon the back of the armchair in which he had been sitting. He well knew by this man's attitude that he meant to "squeeze" him. Nevertheless, he treated his remarks with derision, laughing disdainfully.

"You appear to fancy that because you are now wealthy no words of mine can injure you," the thin-faced man said. "Well, you are welcome to that opinion. The ostrich buries its head in the sand when pursued. You bury yours in the millions which have unexpectedly come to you."

"It is sufficient for you to know that I'll never part with another sou," Zertho answered with impatience.

"Very well, my dear friend, we shall see. Of all men you in the past have been among the most discreet, and none have ever accused you of the folly of impatience; but I tell you plainly that you shall never marry Liane Brooker," he said distinctly, without the slightest undue warmth.

"I intend to marry her," Zertho answered. "In a month she will be my wife."

"You dare not act like that."

"But I shall."

"Then you defy me? Very good. We now understand one another."

"No, I do not defy you," Zertho exclaimed quickly. "But in this matter I shall follow my own inclination entirely. I intend to marry Brooker's daughter."

"Without my sanction?"

"Don't you intend to give it? It surely is no affair of yours?"

"No, I shall not give it," he answered carelessly tossing his dead cigar-end into the ash-tray. "Liane shall never become your wife."

"What! you would tell her?" Zertho gasped, his face suddenly pale and anxious.

"I have already told you that I'm not in the habit of showing my opponent my hand."

"I love Liane. I must marry her," he blurted forth.

"Love! Fancy you, Zertho d'Auzac, declaring that you love a woman!" the man exclaimed, laughing heartily in derision. "The thing's too absurd. I know you too well."

Zertho bit his lip. If any other man had spoken thus he would have knocked him down; but, truth to tell, he was afraid of this dark-faced, crafty-eyed Englishman. Since first he had known him, in the days when he was down on his luck, he had always felt an antipathy towards him, because he treated everything and everybody with such amazingly cool indifference. He saw that money only would appease him. He calculated roughly how much he had already paid him, and the reflection caused him to knit his brows.

"A few minutes ago you said it was a question of price," he said at length. "Well, what are your views?"

"Since then they have changed."

"Changed! How?"

"You say that I have received from you all that you intend I shall receive. Well, let it remain so. You will not marry her."

Zertho regarded him with a puzzled expression.

"I asked you to name your price," he said. "What is it?"

Max Richards, lying back in his chair, his hands clasped behind his head, turned towards his visitor and answered,—

"I have offered to treat with you, but you refused. My offer is therefore withdrawn. I have enough money at present. When I want more I shall come to you."

"But, my dear fellow," exclaimed Zertho, dismayed, "you cannot mean that you refuse to accept anything further for the slight service you have, up to the present, rendered me?"

"Our compact is at an end," the man answered coldly. "No word will pass my lips on one condition, namely, that you release Liane, and—"

"I will never do that!" he cried in fierce determination. "She shall be my wife. Come, name your own terms."

"Ah! I thought you would not be so unwise as to utterly defy me!" exclaimed the man, smiling in triumph. "The prize is too great to relinquish, eh?"

Zertho nodded.

"Come, don't name a figure too exorbitant. Let it be within reason," he said.

"It will be entirely within reason," the other answered, fixing his dark eyes intently upon Zertho's.

"Well?"

"Nothing!" he laughed.

"Nothing? I don't understand."

"I want nothing," he repeated, rousing himself, and bending forward in the lamplight, his eyes still fixed upon the man he was addressing.

"You refuse?"

"Yes, I refuse," he said in a deep intense voice. "I have, it is true, bought and sold many things in my brief and not unblameworthy career, but I have never yet sold a pure woman's life, and by Heaven! I never will!"

Zertho stood in abject dismay. He had been utterly unprepared for this. Anger consumed him when he recognised how completely he had been misled, and how suddenly all his plans were checkmated by this man's unexpected caprice.

"You've suddenly withdrawn into the paths of rectitude," he observed with a sickly smile when at last he found voice. "It will be a new and interesting experience, no doubt."

"Possibly."

"Come, Richards," Zertho exclaimed, after a brief pause, "it's useless to prevaricate any longer. Let us settle the business. I intend marrying Liane, but I am ready to admit that this is possible only with your assistance. For the latter I am prepared to continue to pay as I have already done. Name the amount, and the thing can be settled at once."

"I will name no amount. I decline to barter away Liane's happiness."

"You wish me to name a sum—eh? Well, what do you say to five hundred pounds down? Recollect how much you've already had off me."

The other's lip curled contemptuously, as he shook his head.

"Well, I'll double it. A thousand."

Their gaze met. Max Richards again shook his head.

Zertho, with a sudden movement, pulled his wallet from his pocket, withdrew his cheque-book, and taking up a pen from the table, scribbled out a draft upon the Credit Lyonnais, and filled it in for fifty thousand francs.

Tearing it out roughly he tossed it across to his companion, exclaiming with a bitter smile,—

"There you are. I've doubled it a third time. Surely that's sufficient as lip-salve?"

The other stretched forth his hand unsteadily, hesitated for a single instant, then slowly his thin eager fingers closed upon it.

Chapter Fourteen.

A Woman's Story.

When George Stratfield's coffee was brought to his room at the Grand Hotel on the following morning there lay upon the tray a note which had been brought by hand. The superscription was in educated unfamiliar writing, evidently a woman's.

Filled with natural curiosity he tore open the envelope and read the following in French:—

"The writer would esteem it a personal favour if Monsieur Stratfield would accord her an interview this evening at any time or place he may appoint. As the matter is urgent she will be obliged if Monsieur would have the goodness to telegraph a reply addressed to Marie Blanc, Poste Restante, Nice, before noon."

This mysterious communication he re-read several times. Who, he wondered, was Marie Blanc, and what on earth did she want with him? How, indeed, did she know his name? There was a distinct air of suspicion about it.

He tossed the strange letter aside, and thoughtfully drank his coffee and ate his roll.

Then, dressing, he went out, and strolling along the Promenade past the house where Liane lived, he thought it over. His first inclination was not to heed it. He was sufficiently worried by his own affairs, and had no desire to be bothered about other people's. Marie Blanc was no doubt some woman who had seen his name in the visitor's list and wanted the loan of a pound or two. He had heard of such things happening at Continental resorts. No, he would take no notice of it; so he tore the note into fragments and cast them to the wind.

He had not called upon Liane, or seen her, since their meeting at Monte Carlo. She had forbidden him; and although he had lounged about up and down the broad walk nearly the whole of the previous day, he had seen no sign of her. Evidently she had not been out, and was purposely avoiding him.

Her attitude towards him had filled him with grief and dismay. From her involuntary utterances it was plain that she still loved him, yet her strange declaration that it was imperative she should marry Prince d'Auzac perplexed him to the verge of madness. He had made inquiry about this man, and on every hand heard with chagrin reports of his vast wealth, of the brilliance of his fêtes, and the charm of his personality. He was, without doubt, a prominent figure in Nice society.

To one cause alone was George able to attribute this change in the manner of his well-beloved, the fascination wealth exercises over women. When he compared his own lowly position with that of the man who had taken his place in Liane's heart, he sighed, and was plunged into deep despair. Indeed, that very morning as he lay awake prior to his coffee being brought, he reflected whether it would not be wiser to return at once to London.

But he loved Liane. He would not yet leave her side. She loved him, too, and although this marriage might be forced upon her, yet she was nevertheless his own well-beloved.

Throughout that morning, in the hope of catching sight of Liane, he sauntered about the Promenade, sat for half-an-hour in the Posada-sur-Mer drinking vermouth, where from the open window he could watch each person who passed. But his vigilance remained unrewarded. Time after time he recollected the mysterious request of his unknown correspondent, and found himself half inclined to send a telegram and meet her. It would be an amusing adventure, if nothing else, he thought; and at length, while strolling back to the town, he resolved to do so, and, entering the nearest telegraph office, sent her a reply, asking her to call at his hotel at nine o'clock.

The afternoon he spent lonely and dull. There was, it was true, plenty of amusement going on, but in his frame of mind he was in no mood for concerts, or the mild form of gambling offered by the Casino Municipal. He sat in the public garden listening to the band until sundown, then went for a stroll through the town, dined leisurely, and went to one of the small salons in the hotel there to await his visitor.

A few minutes after nine the door was thrown open by one of the servants, behind whom stood a tall, well-dressed lady.

"M'sieur Stra-atfeeld?" she exclaimed interrogatively, with a very pronounced French accent.

"That is my name," he answered, bowing and inviting her into the room.

The spring nights are chilly in Nice, and she was warmly clad in furs, and wore a neat toque with black veil, but even the spotted net was insufficient to conceal that an eminently handsome face was beneath.

"Your room is warm and cosy," she exclaimed, when he had placed an armchair for her. "It is quite cold outside. May I be permitted to remove my cape?"

"Certainly, madame," he answered, still standing near her, a puzzled expression upon his countenance as she unloosened her sealskin and allowed it to fall over the back of her chair, revealing a trim figure with narrow waist, neatly attired in black silk, the bodice trimmed with cream.

"You were smoking," she said, with a smile. "Pray do not desist on my account. I love tobacco. Indeed, if you offered I would take one of your cigarettes—or would you think me very, very shocking?"

"By all means," he laughed. "I shall be delighted if you'll join me," and he offered her his cigarette-case, and took one himself. Then he struck a vesta while she raised her veil, disclosing a pretty face and an adorable mouth, and lit up with the air of an inveterate smoker. Her fair hair was, he noticed, well-dressed, and her eyes were dark, but there was just the faintest suspicion of artificial colouring in the former, and her cheeks betrayed the use of the hare's foot and carmine. He reflected however, that in a Frenchwoman these little aids to beauty might be forgiven. Her handsome head was well poised, her throat soft and well-rounded, her white gloves new, and her dress a model of combined neatness and elegance. Her exact age was difficult to determine, nevertheless she was still young-looking, and possessed the *chic* of the true Parisienne, which to Englishmen seldom fails to prove attractive.

He made a movement to close the window, but with a pretty pout she detained him, declaring that the room was a little warm, and at least for the present she felt no draught.

He sank back into his chair, and regarded her with an expression half of curiosity, half of surprise. Their eyes met. The silence was awkward, and he broke it by apologising for receiving her somewhat abruptly.

"Ah, you bachelors are generally abrupt to unwelcome visitors?" she answered in her pleasant broken English, with a low rippling laugh. "It is only my much abused sex who prevent you from reverting to utter barbarity. You are not

married. Ah, you should have a wife to look after you."

"Perhaps I may have one—some day," he answered, smiling at her frankness.

Slowly she removed the cigarette from her lips, and her gaze wandered round the brightly-furnished room.

"But you declare yourself to be an unwelcome visitor," he continued. "Why?"

For a moment she regarded the end of her cigarette contemplatively, then turning her dark eyes upon his, answered in a half-apologetic tone—

"Well, you must think my visit here curious, m'sieur. It is. Nevertheless, I trust I may be forgiven for encroaching upon your time, and coming here without introduction. The object of my call is of some concern to you, inasmuch as it is in the interests of one who loves you."

"One who loves me!" he echoed in surprise. "Who?"

"Liane Brooker," answered his fair visitor. "In her interests, and in yours."

"Are you, then, a friend of Liane's?" he inquired, suddenly interested.

"Well, not exactly," she replied, a little evasively he thought.

Then she replaced her cigarette daintily between her lips, and continued smoking with that ease and grace acquired by ladies who are in the habit of soothing their nerves with tobacco.

"Are you acquainted with Captain Brooker?" he asked.

"Yes, we have met," she answered. "You know him, of course? He is such a kind-hearted man, such a thorough Bohemian, yet such a perfect gentleman."

"Unfortunately, I have only met him on one or two occasions," George said. In an instant it had occurred to him that from his mysterious visitor he might learn what Liane and poor Nelly had always refused to tell him. "He has lived here, in France, for some years. What has been his profession?"

"Profession!" she exclaimed, raising her dark well shaped eyebrows. "What! are you unaware?"

"I am entirely ignorant."

"Well, although a military officer, of late years his chief field of operations has been the trente-et-quarante table at Monte Carlo, where he is as well-known as—well, as the fat old gentleman who sits in the bureau to examine one's visiting card."

"A gambler!" he cried, in a tone of disbelief.

"Yes, a gambler," she went on. "Few men of late years have lost such large sums so recklessly as he has. Once everybody followed his play, believing him to be a sort of wizard who could divine the cards undealt; but at last his ill-luck became proverbial, and after ruining himself he left with Liane and Nelly Bridson and went to England."

"And Liane? What of her?" he inquired, dismayed that the man he had held in high esteem as a good-hearted, easy-going fellow should actually turn out to be an adventurer.

"Ah! she has led a strange life," sighed the handsome Frenchwoman. "I have seen her many times, but have seldom spoken much with her. I often met her father in the days of his success, but he for some reason avoided introducing me. Although the circle in which Erle Brooker moved was usually composed of thieves, adventuresses, and the scum of the gambling-hells, he held his daughter aloof from it all. He would never permit her to mix with any of his companions, appearing to entertain a curious suspicion towards even respectable folk, fearing lest she should become contaminated by the world's wickedness. Thus," she added, "Liane and her companion Nelly grew to be sweet and altogether ingenuous girls, who were everywhere respected and admired."

There was a short pause, during which he pondered deeply over the facts his strange visitor had explained. The truth was out at last. Liane was the daughter of an adventurer. He recollected how well she had been dressed when he had met her on the terrace at Monte Carlo, and reflected that her father must be again winning. The reason why she had compelled him to leave her that afternoon, why she had always preserved such a reticence regarding her past life, was now entirely plain. She did not wish that he should know the truth.

"You said that you called in Liane's interests," he observed, presently, glancing at her with earnestness. "How?"

"What are her interests are yours; are they not?" she asked.

"Certainly."

"You love her?"

He smiled at the abruptness of her question. She was leaning back, regarding him with her keen, dark eyes, and holding her cigarette daintily between her bejewelled fingers.

"She has promised to become my wife," he answered.

A strange look crossed her features. There was something of surprise mingled with anger; but in an instant she hid it beneath a calm, sphinx-like expression.

"I fear she will never marry you," she said, with a sigh.

"Why?"

"Because of her engagement to the Prince d'Auzac."

"I care nothing for that," he cried, in anger at mention of his rival's name. "We love each other, and will marry."

"Such a course is impossible," she answered, in a deep impressive voice. "It would be far better if you returned to London—better for you both—for she cannot marry you."

"Why?" he demanded. He suddenly recollected that from this mysterious woman who knew so much of their personal affairs he might obtain knowledge of the secret his well-beloved had refused to disclose. "Why cannot she abandon him, and marry the man she loves?"

"There is a secret reason," his visitor replied. "She dare not."

"Are you aware of the reason?" he demanded, quickly.

"I can guess. If it is as I suspect, then marriage with you is entirely out of the question. She must marry Zertho."

"Because she is in fear of him?" he hazarded.

She shrugged her shoulders with that vivacity which only Frenchwomen possess, but no reply left her lips.

"From what does her strange fear arise?" he asked, bending towards her in his eagerness to learn the truth.

"An overwhelming terror holds her to Zertho. It is a bond which, although he may be hateful to her, as undoubtedly he is, she cannot break. She must become Princess d'Auzac."

"She fears lest he should expose some hidden secret of her past?" he suggested.

"I don't say that," she answered. "Remember I have only suspicions. Nevertheless, from whatever cause arises her terrible dread its result is the same—it prevents her from becoming your wife."

"Yes," he admitted, plunged in gloomy reflections. "It does. I have come out here from London to see her, but she will tell me nothing beyond the fact that she is betrothed to this man, Zertho d'Auzac. At first I believed that the attractions of wealth had proved too strong for her to resist; but your words, in combination with hers, are proof positive that there is some strange, dark secret underlying her engagement to him."

"He has forced her to it," his fair visitor said in a harsh voice. "He's absolutely unscrupulous."

"You know him?"

"Yes," she answered, with a slight hesitancy. "His career has been a curious one. Not long ago he was a fellow-adventurer with Captain Brooker, and well-known in all the gaming-houses in Europe—at Monte Carlo, Spa, Ostend, Namur, and Dinant—as one who lived by exercising his superior intelligence over his fellow-men. He was an 'escroc'—one who lived by his wits, won money at the tables, and when luck was against him did not hesitate to descend to card-sharping in order to secure funds. He was the black sheep of a noble family, an outcast, a cheat and a swindler," she went on with a volubility that surprised him. "He possessed all Erle Brooker's shrewdness without any of his good qualities; for, although the Captain may be an adventurer he has never stooped to meanness. He has always lost and won honourably, regarding his luck, good or ill, with the same imperturbable grim humour and reckless indifference. In the days of his prosperity his hand was ever in his pocket to assist his fellow-gamesters upon whom Misfortune had laid a heavy hand, and more than one young man, drawn to the tables by the hope of winning, has been held back from ruin by his kindly and timely advice. The one was, and is still, a dishonest, despicable knave; while the other was a man of honour, truth and singleness of heart. Suddenly, not long ago, the fortunes of Zertho d'Auzac changed, for his father died and he found himself possessor of a truly princely income and estates. He left the gaming-tables, burned the packs of cards with which he had fleeced so many unsuspecting ones, and returned to Luxembourg to claim his possessions. Since then he has led a life of ease and idleness; yet he is still now, as he ever was, vicious, recreant, and utterly unprincipled."

"And to this man Liane is bound?"

"Yes," she sighed. "Irrevocably, I fear; unless she can discover some means whereby to hold him at defiance."

"But she must. I would rather see her dead than the wife of such a man," he cried.

She remained silent for some minutes. Her cigarette had gone out and she tossed it away. At last she turned to him, exclaiming,—

"Towards her release I am striving. I want your assistance."

"I will render you every help in my power," he answered eagerly. "What can I do?"

"First," she said, glancing at him curiously through her half-raised veil, "first describe to me in detail the whole of the circumstances in which poor Nelly Bridson was killed."

"What!" he exclaimed quickly. "Has her fear any connection with that tragic incident?"

In an instant he remembered the finding of a hairpin near the spot, a pin which had been proved conclusively not to belong to the murdered girl.

"I know it was you who discovered the body," she went on, disregarding his inquiry. "Tell me the whole of the sad affair as far as your knowledge extends. I have, of course, read the accounts of the inquest which appeared in the papers at the time, but I am anxious to ascertain some further details."

"Of what nature?"

"I want you to tell me, if you will," she replied with an interested look, "the exact position of the body when you discovered it."

Her question brought to his memory his ghastly discovery in all its hideousness. There arose before his vision the blanched upturned face of the girl prostrate in the dust, the fallen cycle, and the white, deserted English lane, silent and gloomy in the evening mist.

"Why do you desire me to recall an event so painful?" he asked in a calm tone.

"Because it is necessary that you should tell me exactly how you discovered her," she replied. "You had an appointment with Liane at that very spot on that same evening, had you not?"

"Yes," he answered. "I was, unfortunately, late in keeping it, and rode to the railway bridge at full gallop, expecting to find her still waiting, but instead, found Nelly dead."

"She was lying in the centre of the road?"

"Almost. But a little to the right," he answered. "The road passing beneath the railway takes an abrupt but short incline just where I found her. She was evidently mounting the hill on her cycle when she was shot down."

"Tell me exactly how you discovered her, and how you acted immediately afterwards," she urged. "Begin at the beginning, and tell me all. It may be that you can assist me in releasing Liane from her bondage."

Her words puzzled him, nevertheless, in obedience to her wish, he related in their proper sequence each of the events of that memorable evening; how he had made the appalling discovery, how he had found the long-lost miniature of Lady Anne, had ridden with all speed down to the village for assistance, and how he had subsequently discovered the mysterious hairpin among the long grass by the gateway.

"Have you been able to determine how the missing miniature came into Nelly's possession?" she asked.

"No," he said. "It is entirely a mystery. It almost seems as if she had carried it in her hand, and it fell from her fingers when she was struck."

"The papers also mentioned a brooch which was missing from Nelly's dress," she observed.

"Yes," he replied. "It was no doubt stolen by the murderer."

"Why are you so certain the assassin was also the thief?" she inquired.

"Well, everything points to such being the case," he said.

"When you first discovered the crime are you certain that the brooch was not still at her throat?" his mysterious visitor asked, eyeing him seriously.

He paused, reflecting deeply for a moment.

"I took no notice," he answered. "I was too much upset by the startling discovery to take heed what jewellery the victim wore."

"Cannot you sufficiently recall the appearance of the unfortunate girl when first you saw her to say positively whether or not she was still wearing the ornament? Try; it is most important that this fact should be cleared up," she urged. Her gay carelessness had left her, and she was full of serious earnestness.

Again he reflected. Once more before his vision rose the tragic scene just as he had witnessed it, and somehow, he felt a growing consciousness that this woman's suggestion was correct. Yes, he felt certain that Nelly, although her eyes were sightless and her heart had ceased to beat, still wore the brooch which her admirer had given her. Again and again he strove to decide, and each time he found himself convinced of the one fact alone—that at that moment the brooch was still there.

"Well," she exclaimed at last, after intently watching every expression of his face, "what is your reply?"

"Now that I come to reflect, I am almost positive that the brooch had not been stolen," he answered, slowly.

"You are quite confident of that?" she cried, quickly.

"I will not swear," he answered, "but if my memory does not deceive me it was still at her throat. I recollect noticing a strange mark beneath her chin, and wondering how it had been caused. Without doubt when her head sunk heavily upon her breast in death her chin had pressed upon the brooch."

"In that case you certainly have sufficient justification to take an oath if the question were put to you in a court of justice," she observed, her brows knit reflectively.

George was puzzled how this fact could affect Liane's future welfare, or rescue her from marriage with the Prince. This woman, too, was a mystery, and he found himself wondering who and what she was.

"You are already aware of my name," he observed, after a brief pause. "Now that we have exchanged confidences in this manner, may I not know yours?"

"It is no secret, m'sieur," she replied, looking into his face and smiling. "My name is Mariette Lepage."

"Mariette Lepage!" he gasped, starting from his chair, and glaring at her in bewilderment.

"That, m'sieur, is my name," she answered, opening her dark eyes widely in surprise at his strange and sudden attitude. "Surely it is not so very extraordinary that, in giving you, a stranger, an address at the Post Restante I should have used a name that was not my own?"

Chapter Fifteen.

Held in Bondage.

George Stratfield walked out of his hotel next morning his mind full of Mariette Lepage's strange statements. Long and deeply he pondered over the curious situation, but could discern no solution of the intricate problem. That there was some deep mystery underlying the actions of this woman he could not fail to recognise, yet, try how he would, he nevertheless found himself regarding her with misgiving. Her coquettishness caused him grave suspicion. Although she had endeavoured to convince him of her friendliness towards Liane it was apparent from certain of her remarks that she had some ulterior motive in endeavouring to obtain from him the exact details of the tragedy. He felt confident that she was Liane's enemy.

Was it not a cruel vagary of Fate that he should discover this unknown woman whom his father had designated as his wife, only to find her the bitterest foe of the woman he loved? This was the woman who, under his father's eccentric will, was to be offered twenty thousand pounds to accept him as husband!

He had said nothing of the offer which sooner or later must be formally made to her, but before they had parted she had given him as her address the Villa Fortunée, at Monaco. He remembered the strange fact of one of her letters being found in Nelly Bridson's pocket, but when he mentioned it she had merely remarked that she had been acquainted with the unfortunate girl. Nevertheless, he also recollected that the letter had contained an expression never used in polite society, and that it had been considered by the police as an altogether extraordinary and rather incriminating document.

Confused and bewildered, he was walking beneath the awnings on the shops of the Quai Massena on his way to the Promenade, when suddenly he heard his name uttered, and on looking up found Liane standing before him smiling. In her tailor-made gown of pale fawn with a neat toque, she presented an extremely smart and fresh-looking appearance.

"You were so engrossed, George," she said half-reproachfully, with a pretty pout, "that you were actually passing me unnoticed. What's the matter? Something on your mind?"

"Yes," he answered, endeavouring to laugh, so pleased was he that they had met. "I have something always on my mind—you."

"Then I regret if thoughts of me induce such sadness," she answered, as turning in the direction she was walking he strolled by her side. The March sun was so warm that its fiery rays burnt his face.

"Don't speak like that, Liane," he protested. "You surely must know how heavily those cruel words you spoke at Monte Carlo have fallen upon me. How can I have happiness when I know that ere long we must part?" They had crossed the road, and were entering the public garden in order that passers-by should not overhear their conversation, for in Nice half the people in the streets speak or understand English.

"Yes," she sighed gloomily. "I know I ought not to have spoken like that, George. Forgive me, I know that happiness is not for me, yet I am trying not to wear my heart upon my sleeve."

"But what compels you to marry this man, who was once an adventurer and swindler, and is still unscrupulous? Surely such a man is no fitting husband for you?"

Liane glanced at him quickly in surprise. If her lover knew of Zertho's past he would no doubt have learnt that her father had also earned a precarious livelihood by his wits.

"Already I have told you that a secret tie binds me irrevocably to him," she answered huskily, as slowly, side by side, they strolled beneath the trees.

"It must be broken, whatever its nature," he said quickly.

"Ah! I only wish it could be," she answered wistfully, again sighing. "I am compelled to wear a smiling face, but, alas! it only hides a heart worn out with weariness. I'm the most wretched girl in all the world. You think me cruel and heartless—you believe I no longer love you as I did—you must think so. Yet I assure you that day by day I am

remembering with regret those happy sunny days in Berkshire, those warm brilliant evenings when, wandering through the quiet leafy lanes, we made for ourselves a paradise which we foolishly believed would last always. And yet it is all past—all past, never to return.”

He saw that she was affected, and that tears stood in her eyes.

“Life with me has not the charm it used then to possess, dearest,” he said, in a low, intense tone, as together they sat upon one of the seats. “True, those days at Stratfield were the happiest of all I have ever known. I remember well how, each time we parted, I counted the long hours of sunshine until we met again; how, when I was away from your side, each road, house and tree reminded me of your own dear self; how in my day-dreams I imagined myself living with you always beside me. The blow came—my father died. You were my idol. I cared for nothing else in the world, and before he died I refused to obey his command to part from you.”

“Why,” she asked quickly, “did your father object to me?”

“Yes, darling, he did,” he answered. This was the first time he had told her the truth, and it had come out almost involuntarily.

“Then that is why he acted so unjustly towards you?” she observed, thoughtfully. “You displeased him because you loved me.”

He nodded in the affirmative.

“But I do not regret it,” he exclaimed hastily. “I do not regret, because I still love you as fervently as I did on that memorable evening when my father called me to his bedside and urged me to give up all thought of you. It is because—because of your decision to marry this man, Zertho, that I grieve.”

“It is not my decision,” she protested. “I am forced to act as I am acting.”

“But you shall never marry him!”

“Unfortunately it is beyond your power to assist me, George,” she answered, in a tone of despair. “We love each other, it is true, but we must end it all. We must not meet again,” she added, in a voice broken by emotion. “I—I cannot bear it. Indeed, I can’t.”

“Why should you say this?” he asked, reproachfully. “Loving each other as fondly as we do, we must meet. No power on earth can prevent it.”

They looked fondly into each other’s eyes. Liane saw in his intense passion and earnestness, and knew how well he loved her. Plunged in thought, she traced a semicircle in the dust with the ferrule of her sunshade.

“No,” she said at length, quite calmly. “You must forget, George. I shall leave here to marry and live away in the old château in Luxembourg as one buried. When I am wedded, my only prayer will be that we may never again meet.”

“Why?” he cried, dismayed.

“Because when I see you I always live the past over again. All those bright, happy, joyous days come back to me, together with the tragic circumstances of poor Nelly’s death—the dark shadow which fell between us, the shadow which has lengthened and deepened until it has now formed a barrier insurmountable.”

“What does Nelly’s death concern us?” he asked. “It was tragic and mysterious, certainly; nevertheless, it surely does not prevent our marriage.”

For an instant she glanced sharply at him, then lowering her gaze, answered drily,—

“Of course not.”

“Then why refer to it?”

“Because the mystery has never been solved,” she said, in a tone which surprised him.

“Where the police have failed we can scarcely hope to be successful,” he observed. Yet the harsh, strained voice in which she had spoken puzzled him. More than once it had occurred to him that Liane had never satisfactorily explained where she had been on that well-remembered evening, yet, loving her so well, he had always dismissed any suspicion as wild and utterly unfounded. Nevertheless, her statements to several persons regarding her actions on that evening had varied considerably, and he could not conceal the truth from himself that for a reason unaccountable she had successfully hidden some matter which might be of greatest importance.

“Do you think the truth will ever come out?” she inquired, her eyes still downcast.

“It may,” he answered, watching her narrowly. “The unexpected often happens.”

“Of course,” she agreed, with a faint smile. “But the police have obtained no further clue, have they?” she asked in eagerness.

“Not that I’m aware of,” he answered briefly, and a silence fell between them. “Liane,” he said at last, turning towards her with a calm, serious look, “I somehow cannot help doubting that you are acting altogether straightforward towards me.”

"Straightforward?" she echoed, glancing at him with a look half of suspicion, half of surprise. "I don't understand you."

"I mean that you refuse to tell me the reason you are bound to marry this man you hate," he blurted forth. "You are concealing the truth."

"Only because I am forced to do so," she answered mechanically. "Ah, you do not know all, George, or you would not upbraid me," she added brokenly.

"Why not tell me? Then I might assist you."

"No, alas! you cannot assist me," she answered, in a forlorn, hopeless voice, with head bent and her gaze fixed blankly upon the ground. "If you wish to be merciful towards me, leave here. Return to London and forget everything. While you remain, my terrible secret oppresses me with greater weight, because I know that I have lost for ever all love and hope—that the judgment of Heaven has fallen upon me."

"Why, dearest?" he cried. "How is it you speak so strangely?" Then in an instant remembering her curious words when they had met at Monte Carlo, he added, "Anyone would believe that you had committed some fearful crime."

She started, staring at him with lips compressed, but uttering no response. Her face was that of one upon whose conscience was some guilty secret.

"Come," he said presently, in a kind, persuasive tone. "Tell me why poor Nelly's death is a barrier to our happiness."

"No," she answered, "I cannot. Have I not already told you that my secret is inviolable?"

"You refuse?"

She nodded, her breast heaving and falling.

"Every detail of that terrible affair is still as vivid in my recollection as if it occurred but yesterday," he said. "Until quite recently I have always believed that the assassin stole the brooch she was wearing; but I am now confident that it was stolen between the time I discovered the body and returned with assistance from the village."

She held her breath, but only for a single instant.

"What causes you to think this?" she inquired. "Because I distinctly remember that the brooch was still at her throat when I found her lying in the road. Yet when I returned it was missing. The assassin was not the thief."

"That has been my theory all along," she said.

He noticed the effect his words produced upon her, and was puzzled.

"You have never explained to me, Liane, the reason you did not keep your appointment with me on that evening," he said gravely. "If you had been at the spot we had arranged, Nelly's life would most probably have been saved."

"I was prevented from meeting you," she answered vaguely, after a second's hesitation.

"You have already told me that. What prevented you?"

"A curious combination of circumstances."

"What were they?"

"I started out to meet you, but was prevented from so doing."

"By whom?"

"By a friend."

"Or was it an enemy?" he suggested. Her statement did not coincide with the fact that she had written to him postponing their meeting.

"I do not know," she replied. "When we parted it was long past the hour we had arranged, so I returned home."

"Nelly must at that moment have been lying dead," he observed. "Have you any idea what took her to that spot of all others?"

"None whatever," Liane replied. "Except that, unaware of our appointment, she met someone there."

"You think she met there the person who afterwards shot her?"

"That is my belief."

"Then if you know nothing further regarding the mysterious affair why should it prevent our marriage?" he asked, regarding her intently.

"It is not only that," she replied quickly, "but there is a further reason."

"What is it? Surely I may know," he urged. "You will not send me away in doubt and ignorance, when you know I love

you so well.”

“I cannot tell you,” she answered, panting.

“Then I shall not leave you, and allow you to become this man’s wife—nay, his victim,” he exclaimed passionately. “You do not love him, Liane. You can never love him. Although once a cheat and adventurer he may now have wealth and position, nevertheless he is no fitting husband for you, even though he may give you a fine château, a town house in Brussels, and a villa here, on the Riviera. Wealth will never bring you happiness.”

“Why do you not leave me, George?” she cried, with a sudden movement as if to rise. “Why do you taunt me like this? It is cruel of you.”

“I do not taunt you, dearest,” he protested in a tone of sympathy. “I merely point out the bitter truth. You are betrothed to a man who is in every respect unworthy of you.”

“Ah, no!” she exclaimed hysterically. “It is myself who is unworthy. I—I cannot break the bond between us because—because I fear him.”

“If he holds you secretly in his power why not confide in me?” her lover suggested earnestly. “I may devise some means by which you may escape.”

“If I did you would only hate me,” she answered, her lips trembling in blank despair. “No, do not persuade me. There is but one course I can pursue.”

“You intend marrying him?” he observed huskily.

“Unfortunately it is imperative.”

“Have you ever reflected how utterly wretched your life must necessarily be under such circumstances?” he asked, gazing seriously into her eyes.

“Yes,” she answered, endeavouring vainly to restrain the sob which escaped her. “I know full well the life which must now be mine. Without you I shall not care to live.”

“Then why not allow me to assist you?” he urged. “Whatever may be the nature of your secret, tell me, and let me advise you. Together we will frustrate Zertho’s plans, whatever they may be.”

“Any such attempt would only place me in greater peril,” she pointed out.

“But surely you can rely on my secrecy?” he said. “Do I not love you?”

“Yes, but you would hate me if you knew the truth,” she whispered hoarsely. “Therefore I cannot tell you.”

“Your secret cannot be of such a nature as to cause that, Liane,” he said quietly.

“It is. Even if I told you everything your help would not avail me. Indeed, it would only bring to me greater pain and unhappiness,” she answered quickly.

“Our days of bliss have passed and gone, and with them all hope has vanished. They were full of a perfect, peaceful happiness, because you loved me with the whole strength of your soul, and I idolised you in return. Hour by hour the remembrance of those never-to-be-forgotten hours spent by your side comes back to me. I remember how quiet and peaceful the English village seemed after the noise, rattle and incessant chatter of a gay Continental town, how from the first moment we met, I, already world-weary, commenced a new life. But it is all past—all gone, and I have now only before me a world of bitterness and despair.” And she turned her pale face from his to hide the tears which welled in her eyes.

“You say you were world-weary,” he observed in a low tone. “I do not wonder at it now that I know of your past.”

“My past!” she gasped quickly. “What do you know of my past?”

“I know that your father was a gambler,” he answered. “Ah! what a life of worry and privation yours must have been, dearest. Yet you told me nothing of it!”

She looked at him, but her gaze wavered beneath his.

“I told you nothing because I feared that you would not choose the daughter of an adventurer for a wife,” she faltered.

“It would have made no difference,” he assured her. “I loved you.”

“Yes,” she sighed; “but there is a natural prejudice against women who have lived in the undesirable set that I have.”

“Quite so,” he admitted. “Nevertheless, knowing how pure and noble you are, dearest, this fact does not trouble me in the least. I am still ready, nay, anxious, to make you my wife.”

She shook her head gravely. Her hand holding her sunshade trembled as she retraced the semicircle in the dust.

“No,” she exclaimed at last. “If you would be generous, George, leave me and return to London. In future I must bear my burden myself; therefore, it is best that I should begin now. To remain here is useless, for each time I see you

only increases my sadness; each time we meet brings back to me all the memories I am striving so hard to forget.”

“But I cannot leave you, Liane,” he declared decisively. “You shall not throw yourself helplessly into the hands of this unscrupulous man without my making some effort to save you.”

“It is beyond your power—entirely beyond your power,” she cried, dejectedly. “I would rather kill myself than marry him; yet I am compelled to obey his will, for if I took my life in order to escape, others must bear the penalty which I feared to face. No, if you love me you will depart, and leave me to bear my sorrow alone.”

“I refuse to obey you,” he answered, firmly. “Already you know that because I loved you so well I have borne without regret my father’s action in leaving me almost penniless. Since that day I have worked and striven with you always as my pole-star because you had promised to be mine. Your photograph looked down at me always from the mantelshelf of my dull, smoke-begrimed room. It smiled when I smiled, and was melancholy when I was sad. And the roses and violets you have sent from here made my room look so gay, and their perfume was so fresh that they seemed to breathe the same sweet odour that your chiffons always exhale. Your letters were a little cold, it is true; but I attributed that to the fact that in Nice the distractions are so many that correspondence is always sadly neglected. Picture to yourself what a blow it was to me when, on the terrace at Monte Carlo, you told me that you had another lover, and that you intended to marry him. I felt—”

“Ah!” she cried, putting up her little hand to arrest the flow of his words, “I know, I know. But I cannot help it. I love you still—I shall love you always. But our marriage is not to be.”

He paused in deep reflection. There was one matter upon which he had never spoken to her, and he was wondering whether he should mention it, or let it remain a secret within him. In a few moments, however, he decided.

“I have already told you the cause which led my father to treat me so unjustly, Liane,” he said, looking at her seriously, “but there is one other fact of which I have never spoken. My father left me a considerable sum of money on condition that I married a woman whom I had never seen.”

“A woman you had never seen!” she exclaimed, at first surprised, then laughing at the absurdity of such an idea.

“Yes. It was his revenge. I would not promise to renounce all thought of you, therefore, in addition to leaving me practically a pauper, he made a tantalising provision that if I chose to marry this mysterious woman, of whom none of my family knew anything, I was to receive a certain sum. This woman must, according to the will, be offered a large sum as bribe to accept me as husband, therefore ever since my father’s death his solicitors have been endeavouring to discover her.”

“How extraordinary!” she said, deeply interested in his statement. “Has the woman been found?”

“Yes. I discovered her yesterday,” he replied. “You discovered her! Then she is here, in Nice?”

“Yes, strangely enough, she is here.”

“What’s her name?”

“Mariette Lepage.”

Instantly her face went pale as death.

“Mariette Lepage!” she gasped hoarsely.

“Yes. The woman whose strange letter was found upon Nelly after her death,” he answered. “What my father could have known of her I am utterly at a loss to imagine.”

“And she is actually here, in Nice,” she whispered in a strange, terrified voice, for in an instant there had arisen before her vision the dark angry eyes of the woman in mask and domino who had pelted her so unmercifully on that Sunday afternoon during Carnival.

“Yes, she is here,” he said, glancing at her sharply. “She was evidently well acquainted with poor Nelly. What do you know of her?”

“I—I know nothing,” she answered in an intense, anxious tone, as one consumed by some terrible dread. “Mariette Lepage is not my friend.”

And she sat panting, her chin sunk upon her breast as if she had been dealt a blow.

Chapter Sixteen.

The Golden Hand.

When a few minutes later they rose Liane declared that she must return to lunch; therefore they walked together in the sun-glare along the Promenade, at that hour all but deserted, for the cosmopolitan crowd of persons who basked in the brilliant sunshine during the morning had now sought their hotels for déjeuner. Few words they uttered, so full of gloom and sadness were both their hearts. Liane had insisted that this must be their last meeting, but time after time he had declared that he would never allow her to marry Zertho, although he could make no suggestion whereby she could escape the cruel fate which sooner or later must overwhelm her.

They had strolled about half-way towards the villa in which she and the Captain were staying, when suddenly he halted opposite a short narrow lane, which opened from the Promenade into the thoroughfare running parallel—the old and narrow Rue de France. On either side were high garden walls, and half-way along, these walls, taking a sudden turn at right angles, opened wider; therefore the way was much narrower towards where they stood than at the opposite end.

“Let us go down here,” George suggested. “There is more shade in the street, and you can then reach your villa by the back entrance.”

“No,” she answered, glancing with repugnance at the narrow lane, and turning away quickly. He fancied she shuddered; but, on glancing at the clean little thoroughfare only about a hundred paces in length, he could detect nothing which could cause her repulsion, and at once reassured himself that he had been mistaken.

“But it is so terribly hot and dazzling along here,” he urged.

“You should carry a sun-umbrella,” she smiled. “But there, I suppose men don’t care to be seen with green gingham.”

“But surely this glare upon the footway hurts your eyes,” he continued. “It is so much cooler in the Rue de France.”

“No,” she replied. And again he thought he detected a gesture of uneasiness as, turning from him, she walked on, her sunshade lowered to hide her face. Puzzled, he stepped forward and quickly caught her up. There was, he felt certain, some hidden reason why she declined to pass along that small unnamed lane. But he did not refer to the subject again, although after he had left her he pondered long and deeply upon her curious attitude, and in walking back to the town he turned into the narrow passage and passed through it to the Rue de France, whence he took the tram down to the Place Massena.

A dozen times had she urged him to leave her and return to London, but so full of mystery seemed all her actions that he was more than ever determined to remain and strive to elucidate the reason of her dogged silence, and solve the curious problem of her strange inexplicable terror.

It was plain that she feared Mariette Lepage, and equally certain also that this mysterious woman who feigned to be her friend was nevertheless her bitterest foe. The reason of her visit to him was not at all plain. Her inquiries regarding the tragic circumstances of Nelly Bridson’s death were, he felt confident, mere excuses. As he sat in the tram-car while it jogged slowly along the narrow noisy street, it suddenly occurred to him that from her he might possibly obtain some information which would lead him to an explanation of Liane’s secret.

He thought out the matter calmly over a pipe at his hotel, and at last decided upon a bold course. She had given him her address, he would, therefore, seek her that afternoon.

In pursuance of his plan he alighted about four o’clock from the train at Monaco Station and inquired his way to the Villa Fortunée. Following the directions of a waiter at the Hôtel des Négociants, he walked down the wide read to the foot of the great rock whereon the town is situated, then ascended by the broad footway, so steep that no vehicles can get up, and passing through the narrow arches of the fort, found himself at last upon the ramparts, in front of the square Moorish-looking palace of the Prince. Around the small square were mounted several antiquated cannon, while near them were formidable-looking piles of heavy shot which are carefully dusted each day, and about the tiny review ground there lounged several gaudily-attired soldiers in light blue uniforms, lolling upon the walls smoking cigarettes. The Principality is a small one, but it makes a brave show, even though its defences remind one of comic opera, and its valiant soldiers have never smelt any other powder save that of the noon-day gun. The silence of the siesta was still upon the little place, for the afternoon was blazing hot. On one side of the square the sentry at the Palace-gate leaned upon his rifle half-asleep, while on the other the fireman sat upon the form outside the engine-house, and with his hands thrust deep in his trousers-pockets moodily watched the slowly-moving hands of the clock in its square, white castellated tower.

George stood for a few moments in the centre of the clean, carefully-swept square, the centre of one of the tiniest governments in the world, then making further inquiry of the sleepy fireman, was directed along the ramparts until he found himself before a fine, square, flat-roofed house, with handsome dead white front, which, facing due south and situated high up on the summit of that bold rock, commanded a magnificent view of Cap Martin, the Italian coast beyond, and the open Mediterranean. Shut off from the ramparts by a handsome iron railing, the garden in front was filled with high palms, fruitful oranges, variegated aloes and a wealth of beautiful flowers, while upon a marble plate the words “Villa Fortunée” were inscribed in gilt letters. The closed sun-shutters were painted white, like the house, and about the exterior of the place was an air of prosperity which the young Englishman did not fail to notice.

Its situation was certainly unique. Deep below, on the great brown rocks descending sheer into the sea, the long waves lashed themselves into white foam, while away sea-ward the water was a brilliant blue which, however, was losing its colour each moment as the shadows lengthened. Within sight of gay, dazzling Monte Carlo, with all her pleasures and flaunting vices, all her fascinating beauty and hideous tragedy, the house was nevertheless quiet and eminently respectable. For an instant he paused to glance at the beautiful view of sea-coast and mountain, then entering the gate, rang the bell.

An Italian man-servant opened the door and took his card, and a few moments later he was ushered into the handsome salon, resplendent with gilt and statuary, where Mariette Lepage had evidently been dozing. The jalousies of the three long windows were closed; the room, perfumed by great bowls of violets, was delightfully cool; and the softly-tempered light pleasant and restful after the white glare outside.

“This is an unexpected pleasure,” Mariette exclaimed in English, rising to allow her hand to linger for an instant in his, then sinking back with a slight yawn upon her silken couch. In the half-light, as she reclined in graceful abandon upon

the divan, her head thrown back upon a great cushion of rose silk, she looked much younger than she really was. George had guessed her age at thirty-five when she had called at his hotel, but in that dimly-lit room, with her veil removed and attired in a thin light-coloured gown she looked quite ten years younger, and certainly her face was eminently handsome.

She stretched out her tiny foot, neat in its silk stocking and patent leather shoe, with an air of coquetry, and in doing so displayed either by accident or design that *souçon* of *lingerie* which is no indiscretion in a Frenchwoman.

He had taken a seat near her, and was apologising for calling during her siesta.

"No, no," she exclaimed, with a light laugh. "I am extremely glad you've come. I retire so late at night that I generally find an afternoon doze beneficial. We women suffer from nerves and other such things of which you men know nothing."

"Fortunately for us," he observed. "But then we are liable to a malady of the heart of far greater severity than that to which your sex is subject. Women's hearts are seldom broken; men's often are. A woman can forget as easily as a child forgets; but the remembrance of a face, of a voice, of a pair of eyes, to him brighter and clearer than all others, is impressed indelibly upon a man's memory. Every woman from the moment she enters her teens is, I regret to say, a coquette at heart. In the game of love the chances are all against the man."

"Why are you so pessimistic?" she asked, raising herself upon her elbow and looking at him amused. "All women are not heartless. Some there are who remember, and although evil and vicious themselves, are self-denying towards others."

"Yes," he answered. "A few—a very few."

"Of course you must be forgiven for speaking thus," she said, in a soft, pleasant tone. "Your choice of a woman has been an exceedingly unhappy one."

"Why?" he exclaimed, with quick suspicion. "What allegation do you make against Liane?"

"I make no allegation, whatever, m'sieur," she answered, with a smile. "It was not in that sense my words were intended. I meant to convey that your love has only brought unhappiness to you both."

"Unfortunately it has," he sighed. "In vain have I striven to seek some means in which to assist Liane to break asunder the tie which binds her to Prince Zertho, but she will not explain its nature, because she says she fears to do so."

"I am scarcely surprised," she answered. "Her terror lest the true facts should be disclosed is but natural."

"Why?" he inquired, hastily.

But she shook her head, saying: "Am I not striving my utmost to assist her? Is it therefore to be supposed that I shall explain facts which she desires should remain secret? The object of your present visit is surely not to endeavour to entrap me into telling you facts which, for the present, will not bear the light? Rather let us come to some understanding whereby our interests may be mutual."

"It was for that reason I have called," he said, in a dry, serious tone. Her gaze met his, and he thought in that half-light he detected in her dark, brilliant eyes a keen look of suspicion.

"I am all attention," she answered, pleasantly, moving slightly, so that she faced him.

"Well, mine is a curious errand," he began, earnestly, bending towards her, his elbows on his knees. "There is no reason, as far as I'm aware, why, if you are really Liane's friend, we should not be perfectly frank with one another. First, I must ask you one question—a strange one you will no doubt regard it. But it is necessary that I should receive an answer before I proceed. Did you ever live in Paris—and where?"

She knit her brows for an instant, as if questions regarding her past were entirely distasteful.

"Well, yes," she answered, after some hesitation. "I once lived in Paris with my mother. We had rooms in the Rue Toullier."

"Then there can be no mistake," he exclaimed, quickly. "You are Mariette Lepage."

"Of course I am," she said, puzzled at the strangeness of his manner. "Why?"

"Because there is a curious circumstance which causes our interests to be mutual," he answered, watching the flush of excitement upon her face as he spoke. "Briefly, my father, Sir John Stratfield, was somewhat eccentric, and because he knew I loved Liane, he left me penniless. He, however, added an extraordinary clause to his will, in which you are mentioned." Then drawing from his breast-pocket a copy of the document, he glanced at it.

"I am mentioned?" she echoed, raising herself and regarding him open-mouthed.

"Yes," he said. "By this will he has left me one hundred thousand pounds on condition that I become your husband within two years of his death."

"You—my husband?" she cried. "Are you mad?"

"Not so mad as my father when he made this absurd will," he answered, calmly. "You are, under its provisions, to be

offered twenty thousand pounds in cash if you will consent to become my wife. This offer will be made to you formally by his solicitors in London as soon as I inform them that you are at last found. Read for yourself," and he passed to her the copy of the will.

She took it mechanically, but for several moments sat agape and motionless. The extraordinary announcement held her bewildered. Quickly she glanced through the long lines of formal words, reassuring herself that he had spoken the truth. She was to receive twenty thousand pounds if she would marry the man before her, while he, on his part, would become possessed of a substantial sum sufficient to keep them comfortably for the remainder of their lives. At first she was inclined to doubt the genuineness of the document; but it bore the signature of the firm of solicitors, and was attested by them to be a true copy of the original will. It held her dumb in astonishment.

"Then we are to marry?" she observed amazedly, when at last she again found voice.

"The offer is to be made to you," he answered, evasively. "As you have seen, if you refuse, or if you are already married, I am to receive half the amount."

"I am not married," she answered with a slightly coquettish smile, her chin resting upon her palm in a reflective attitude as she gazed at him. "Marriage with you will mean that we have together the substantial sum of one hundred and twenty thousand pounds."

"That is so," he said gravely. "If we married we certainly should have money."

"But you love Liane," she answered in a low tone. "You can never love me," and she sighed.

He did not answer. The look upon his face told her the truth. He feared lest she should accept this curious offer, knowing that he would then be drawn into a marriage with her. She regarded him critically, and saw that he was tall, good-looking, muscular, and in every way a thorough type of the good-natured Englishman. Twenty thousand pounds was, she reflected, a sum that would prove very acceptable, for she lived extravagantly, and the Villa Fortunée itself was an expensive luxury.

"It is very dull living alone," she exclaimed, with a little touch of melancholy in her voice. Then, with a laugh, she added, "To be perfectly frank, I should not object to you as my husband."

"But is there not a barrier between us?" he exclaimed, quickly.

"Only Liane. And she can never marry you."

"I love her. I cannot love you," he answered. Her effort at coquetry sickened him.

"It is not a question of love," she answered, coldly, toying with the fine marquise ring upon her white finger. "It is a question of one hundred and twenty thousand pounds."

"Would either of us be one whit the better for it, even if we married?" he queried. "I think not. At present we are friends. If we married I should hate you."

"Nevertheless I should obtain twenty thousand pounds," she argued.

"Is it worth while to risk one's future happiness for that?" he said.

"I have not yet sufficiently considered the matter," she replied, with her eyes still fixed on him. "At present I'm inclined to think that it is. But I must have time to reflect. One cannot refuse such an offer without due consideration."

"Then you are inclined to accept," he observed, blankly.

She hesitated. Slowly she rose from the settee, crossed to the window and pushed open the sun-shutters, allowing the golden sunset to stream into the room from over the clear blue-green sea.

"Yes," she answered, standing gazing out upon the far-off horizon where the white-sailed racing yachts, Ailsa and Britannia, were passing, "I am inclined to accept."

"Very well," he stammered, sitting rigid and immovable. "My future is entirely in your hands."

She passed her hand wearily across her brow. With the sunset falling full upon her, he saw how heavy-eyed she was, and how artificial was the complexion that had looked so well in the dreamy half-light when the jalousies had been closed. Yes. She no doubt bore traces of a faded beauty, but she was old; there were lines in her brow, and crows' feet showed at the corners of her eyes. She was *passée*, and all the vivacity and coquettishness she had shown had been carefully feigned to assume an appearance of youth. The thought of it nauseated him.

Again she turned towards him. Her momentary gravity had vanished, and she commenced a commonplace conversation. At last, however, he rose to go, but she would not hear of it.

"No; remain here and dine," she said, in a low, persuasive tone. "Afterwards we can go over to Monte Carlo for an hour or so, and you can catch the yellow *rapide* back to Nice at eleven."

"But you must really excuse me. I—"

"I will take no excuse," she said, laughing. "You must remain," and she rang for the servant and told him that m'sieur would dine.

Together they stood at the open window watching the succession of lights and shadows upon the purple mountains, how the rose of the afterglow grew deeper over the sea until it faded, and the streak of gold and orange died out behind the distant rocks of Cap d'Aggio. Then the mists rose, creeping slowly up the mountain sides, the dusk deepened, a chill wind blew in from the sea, and just as they closed the windows the door opened and the man announced dinner.

The table, set for two in a cosy little *salle-à-manger*, glittered with its cut-glass and shining plate, and was rendered bright by its shaded candles and small silver repoussé stands filled with choice flowers. Throughout the meal she was gay and vivacious, speaking but little of herself and carefully avoiding all references to Liane. He found her a pleasant hostess, unusually well-informed for a woman. They discussed art and literature, and in all her criticisms she exhibited a wide and intimate knowledge of men and things. Then, when they rose, she opened a door at the further end of the room and he found himself in a spacious conservatory, where she invited him to smoke while she dressed to go to the Casino.

Half an hour later she reappeared in a handsome gown of pale blue silk, the corsage trimmed with narrow braiding of silver; a costume which suited her admirably, yet so daring was it that he could not disguise from himself the suggestion that it was the dress of a *demi-mondaine*. Her hair had been redressed by her maid, and as he placed about her shoulders her small black cape of lace and feathers, he mumbled an apology that he was not able to dress.

"What does it matter? I invited you," she said, with a gay laugh. "Come."

Together they entered the open carriage awaiting them, and descending the long winding road to the shore, drove rapidly through La Condamine, and ascended the steep incline which brought them round to the main entrance to the Casino.

The night was brilliant, and the broad Place, with its palms and flowers, its gay, laughing crowd of promenaders, and its showy Café de Paris, where the band was playing Mattei's "*Non è ver*," lay bright as day beneath the moonbeams and electric rays. As they entered, Mariette handed him her cape, which he deposited for her in the cloakroom, then both passed through a crowd of habitués of the rooms. Several men around bowed to her, and she greeted them with a smile.

"You appear to be well-known here," he laughed, as the well-guarded doors opened to them.

"I suppose I am," she answered vaguely. "When I am lonely I come here and play. It is the only recreation I have."

The rooms were hot and crowded. The monotonous cry of the croupiers, the incessant clicking of the roulette-ball, the jingle of coin, and the faint odour of perfume were in striking contrast to the quiet of the road along which they had just driven, but walking side by side they passed through one room after another until they reached that fine square salon, with its huge canvas representing a peaceful pastoral scene occupying the whole of the opposite wall, the "*trente-et-quarante*" room.

There was not quite so large a crowd here, but the stakes were higher, a louis being the minimum. Mariette saw a player rise from his chair at the end of the table and instantly secured the vacant seat, then turning to her companion with a gay laugh, said,—

"I am going to tempt Fortune for half an hour."

She took from the large purse she carried a card on which to record the game, impaled it to the green cloth with a pin, in the manner of the professional gambler, and drew forth a small roll of notes.

The first time she played the "*tailleur*" dealt the cards quickly, one by one, then cried, "*Six, quatre, rouge gagne et couleur perd.*"

She had lost. But next time she tossed two notes upon the scarlet diamond before her and won. She doubled her stake, won again, and then allowed the cards to be dealt several times without risking anything. Presently, she hesitated, but suddenly counted out five one hundred-franc notes, folded them in half and carelessly tossed them upon the red. Again the cards were dealt one by one upon the leather-covered square; again the monotonous voice sounded, and again came her winnings towards her, five notes folded together on the end of the croupier's rake.

So engrossed had George become in the game, that he noticed nothing of what was transpiring around him. Had he not been so deeply interested in the play of this woman whom his father had designated as his wife, his attention would probably have been attracted by a curious incident.

At the moment when the cards had been dealt, a man seated at the end of the opposite table, who, with his companion had won a considerable sum, raised his head, and, for the first time, noticed amid the excited expectant crowd, that it was a woman who had been successful at the other table.

The man was Zertho. Next instant, however, his face went white. In his eyes there was a look of abject terror when he identified the lucky player. With a sudden movement he put his hand to his head to avoid recognition, and bending quickly to his companion, gasped,—

"Look, Brooker! Can't you see who's in front? Good God! why there's 'The Golden Hand.' Quick! We must fly!"

Chapter Seventeen.

The House of the Wicked.

Next afternoon Liane and Zertho strolled up to Cimiez together to pay a call upon a Parisian family named Bertholet, who lived in one of those fine white houses high up on the Boulevard de Cimiez, and who had recently accepted the Prince's hospitality.

As they turned from the dusty Boulevard Carabacel, and commenced the long ascent where the tree-lined road runs straight up to the glaring white façade of the Excelsior Regina Hotel, Zertho expressed a fear that she would be fatigued ere they reached their destination, and urged her to take a cab.

"I'm not at all tired," she assured him, nevertheless halting a second, flushed and warm, to regain breath. "The day is so beautiful that a walk will do me no end of good."

"It's a dreadful bore to have to toil up and call on these people, but I suppose I must be polite to them. They are worth knowing. Bertholet is, I hear, a well-known banker in Paris."

Liane smiled. The patronising air with which her companion spoke of his newly-found friends always amused her.

"Besides," he added, "we must now make the best of the time we have in Nice. We leave to-morrow, or the day after."

"So sudden!" she exclaimed, surprised. "I thought we should remain for another fortnight or three weeks. The weather is so delightful."

"I have arranged it with the Captain," he said briefly. "Do you regret leaving?"

"How can I regret?" she asked, glancing at him and raising her brows slightly. "How can I regret when the place, so fair in itself, is to me so hateful? No, I'm glad for several reasons that we are leaving."

She recollected at that moment what George had told her. Mariette Lepage was near them. She remembered, too, the fierce expression of hatred in that pair of angry eyes shining through the mask.

"Yes," he said at length, "one can have too much of a good thing, and sometimes it is even possible to have too much of the Riviera. I have the satisfaction at least of having succeeded in obtaining a footing in society." And he laughed as he added, "A year ago I was a down-at-heel adventurer, almost too shabby to obtain admittance at Monte Carlo, while to-day I'm welcomed everywhere, even among the most exclusive set. And why? Merely because I have money and impudence."

"Yes," Liane admitted, with a touch of sorrow. "This is indeed a curious world. There is a good deal of truth in the saying that a man is too often judged by his coat."

"And a woman by her dress," he added quickly. "When you are Princess d'Auzac, you will find that other women will crowd around you and pet you, and declare you are the most beautiful girl of the year—as, of course, you are—all because you have wealth and a title. They like to speak to their friends of 'My friend the Princess So-and-So.'"

"You are very complimentary," she answered, coldly. "I have no desire to excite either the admiration or envy of other women."

"Because you have never yet fully realised how beautiful you are," he answered.

"Oh yes, I have. Every woman knows the exact worth of her good looks."

"Some over-estimate them, no doubt," he said, with a laugh. "But you have always under-estimated yours. If the Captain had chosen he could have already married you to a dozen different men, all wealthy and distinguished."

"Dear old dad loved me too well to sacrifice my happiness for money," she said, climbing slowly the steep hill.

"Yet you declare that you are doing so by marrying me," he observed, his eyes fixed upon the ground.

"I am only marrying you because you compel me," she answered, huskily. "You know that."

"Why do you hate me?" he cried, dismayed. "I have surely done my best to render your life here happy? In the past I admired your grace and your beauty, but because of my poverty I dared not ask the Captain for you. Now that I have the means to give you the luxury which a woman like yourself must need, you spurn my love, and—"

"Your love!" she cried, with a gesture of disgust, her eyes flashing angrily. "Do not speak to me of love. You may tell other women that you love them, but do not lie to me!"

"It is no lie," he answered. She had never spoken so frankly before, and her manner showed a fierce determination which surprised him.

"You have a manner so plausible that you can utter falsehoods so that they appear as gospel truth," she said. "Remember, however, that you and my father were once fellow-adventurers, and that years ago I thoroughly gauged your character and found it exactly as superficial and unprincipled as it is now."

"The past is forgotten," he snapped. "It is useless to throw into my face facts and prejudices which I am striving to live down."

"No," she cried. "The past is not forgotten, otherwise you would not compel me to become your wife. How can you say that the past is buried, when at this moment you hold me beneath your hateful thrall, merely because my face and my figure please you, merely because you desire that I should become your wife?"

"With you at my side I shall, I trust, lead a better life," he said, calmed by her rebuff.

"It is useless to cant in that manner," she exclaimed, turning upon him fiercely. "In you, the man I have always mistrusted as knavish and unscrupulous, I can never place confidence. The mean, shabby, tricks you have served men who have been your friends are in themselves sufficient proof of your utter lack of good-will, and show me that you are dead to all honour. Without confidence there can be no love."

"I have promised before Heaven to make you happy," he answered.

"Ah, no," she said, in a choking voice of bitter reproach. "Speak not of holy things, you, whose heart is so black. If you would make your peace with God give me back my liberty, my life, before it is too late."

Her face was pale, her lips were dry, and she panted as she spoke.

But they had gained the gate of the villa where they were to call, and pushing it open he held it back with a low bow for her to pass. Her grey eyes, so full of grief and despair, met his for an instant, and she saw he was inexorable. Then she passed in up to the door, and a few minutes later found herself in the salon chatting with her voluble hostess, while Zertho sat with Madame's two smart daughters, both true Parisiennes in manner, dress, and speech.

"We only heard to-day of your engagement to the Prince," Madame Bertholet was saying in French. "We must congratulate you. I'm sure I wish you every happiness."

"Thank you," she said, with a forced smile. "It is extremely good of you."

"And when and where do you marry?"

"In Brussels, in about three weeks," Liane answered, striving to preserve an outward appearance of happiness. It was, however, but a sorry attempt. From the windows of their salon Madame Bertholet and her daughters had noticed the strange imploring look upon Liane's face as they had approached the gate, and had wondered.

Yet when she had entered she had sparkled with fun and vivacity, and it was only the mention of marriage which had disarmed her.

"After Brussels you will, of course, go to your new home in Luxembourg," said Madame. "Have you seen it?"

Liane replied in the negative.

"I happen to know Luxembourg very well. My brother, strangely enough, is one of the Prince's tenants."

"Oh, then, you of course know my future home," exclaimed Liane, suddenly interested.

"Yes, very well. The château is a fine old place perched high up, overlooking a beautiful fertile valley," her hostess replied. "I once went there a few years ago, when the old Prince was alive, and I well remember being charmed by the romantic quaintness of its interior. Inside, one is back three centuries; with oak panelling, old oak furniture, great old-fashioned fireplaces with cosy corners, and narrow windows, through which long ago archers shed their flights of arrows. There is a dungeon, too; and a dark gloomy prison-chamber in one of the round turrets. It is altogether a most delightful old place."

"Gloomy, I suppose?" observed Liane thoughtfully.

"Well, life amid such old-world surroundings as those could scarcely be quite as bright or enjoyable as Nice or Paris, but it is nevertheless a magnificent and well-preserved relic of a bygone age. Without doubt it is one of the finest of feudal châteaux in Europe."

"Are any of the rooms modern?"

"None," Madame replied. "It seems to have been the hobby of the Princes d'Auzac to preserve intact its ancient character. You will be envied as the possessor of such a fine old place. I shall be delighted to come and see you when you are settled—if I may."

"Certainly. I, too, shall be delighted," Liane answered mechanically. "In a place like that one will require a constant supply of visitors to make life at all endurable. It is, I fear, one of those grey, forbidding-looking old places as full of rats as it is of traditions."

"I don't know about the rats," her hostess answered, laughing heartily. "But there are, I know, many quaint and curious legends connected with the place. My brother told me some."

"What were they about?"

"Oh, about the tyranny of the d'Auzacs who, in the middle ages, ravaged the Eiffel and the Moselle valley, and more than once attacked the town of Trêves itself. In those days the name of d'Auzac was synonymous of all that was cruel and brutal; but the family have become civilised since then, and," she added, looking towards Zertho, who was laughing with her two daughters, "the Prince scarcely looks a person to be feared."

"No," observed Liane, with a forced smile. To her also the name of d'Auzac was synonymous of cunning, brutality,

and unscrupulousness. She pictured to herself the great mountain stronghold, a grim, grey relic of an age of barbarism, the lonely dreary place peopled by ghosts of an historic past, that was to be her home, in which she was to live with this man who held her enthralled. Then she shuddered.

Her hostess noticed it, wondered, but attributed it to the draught from the open window. To her it was inconceivable that any girl could refuse Prince Zertho's offer of marriage. He was one of the most eligible of men, his polished manner had made him a favourite everywhere, and one heard his wealth discussed wherever one visited. Either of her own daughters would, she knew, be only too pleased to become Princess.

Liane, although nothing of a coquette, was nevertheless well enough versed in the ways of the world to be tactful when occasion required, and at this moment strenuously strove not to betray her world-weariness. Although consumed by grief and despair she nevertheless smiled with feigned contentment, and a moment later with an air so gay and flippant that none would guess the terrible dread which was wearing out her young life, joined in the light amusing chatter with Madame's daughters.

"We saw you at Monte Carlo last night," one of the girls exclaimed, suddenly, addressing Zertho.

"Did you?" he answered, with a start. "I really saw nothing of you."

"We were quite close to you," observed her sister, "You were sitting with Captain Brooker, and were having quite a run of good fortune when, suddenly, you both jumped up and disappeared like magic. We tried to attract your attention, but you would not glance in our direction. Before we could get round to you you had gone. Why did you leave so quickly?"

"We wanted to catch our train," Zertho answered, a lie ever ready upon his lips. "We had only three minutes, and just managed to scramble in."

"Did you notice a fine, handsome-looking woman at the table, a woman in blue dress trimmed with silver?" asked Madame Bertholet.

Zertho again started. In a second, however, he recovered his self-possession.

"I am afraid I did not," he replied with a smile.

"I was too intent upon the game. Besides," and he paused, glancing at Liane, "female beauty ought not to attract me now."

They all laughed in chorus.

"Of course not," Madame agreed. "But the woman wore such a gay costume, and was altogether so reckless that I thought you might have noticed her. Everybody was looking at her. I was told that she is a well-known gambler who has won huge sums at various times, and is invariably so lucky that she is known to habitués of the table as 'The Golden Hand.'"

"Everything her hand touches turns to gold—eh?" Zertho hazarded. "I only wish my fingers possessed the same potency. It must be delightful."

"But she's not at all a desirable acquaintance, if all I hear is true," Madame observed. "Do you know nothing of her by repute?"

"I fancy I've heard the sobriquet before," he replied. "I'm sorry I didn't notice her. Did she win?"

Liane and the Prince exchanged significant glances. "Yes, while we watched she won, at a rough estimate, nearly twenty thousand francs," one of the girls said.

"A friend who accompanied us told us all about her," Madame observed. "Hers has been a most remarkable career. It appears that at one time she was well-known in Paris as a singer at La Scala, and the music halls in the Champs Elysées, but some mysterious circumstance caused her to leave Paris hurriedly. She was next heard of in New York, where she was singing at the music halls, and it was said that she returned to France at the country's expense, but that, on being brought before the tribunal, the charge against her could not be substantiated, and she was therefore released. Subsequently, after a strange and chequered life, she turned up about four years ago at Monte Carlo, and became so successful that very soon she had amassed a considerable sum of money. To the attendants and those who frequent the Casino she is a mystery. For sheer recklessness no woman who comes to the tables has her equal; yet she is invariably alone, plays at her own discretion without consulting anyone, and with a thoroughly business-like air, speaks to scarcely anybody, and always rises from the table at eleven, whether winning or losing. Indeed, 'The Golden Hand' is altogether a most remarkable person."

"Curious," observed Zertho, reflectively. "I wish I had noticed her. You say she was sitting at our table?"

"Yes," answered one of the girls. "She sat straight before you, and because you were winning she watched you closely several times."

"Watched me!" he exclaimed, dismayed.

"Yes," answered the girl, with a laugh. "Why, you speak as if she possessed the evil eye, or something! She's smart and good-looking certainly, but I don't think Liane need fear in her a rival."

"Scarcely," he answered, with a forced smile. But the alarming truth possessed him that Mariette had surreptitiously

watched Brooker and himself before they had discovered her presence. He reproached himself bitterly for having gone to Monte Carlo that night, yet gambler that he was he had been unable to resist the temptation of the tables once again ere they left the Riviera.

But the woman known as "The Golden Hand" had watched them both, and by this time most probably knew where they were living. Neither he nor the Captain had any idea that Mariette Lepage still hovered about the tables, or they would certainly never have set foot inside the Principality.

Liane in her cool summer-like gown sat in a low wicker lounge-chair and listened to this description of the notorious woman without uttering a word. She dared not trust herself to speak lest she should divulge the secret within her breast. She had grown uncomfortable, and only breathed more freely when, ten minutes later, they made their adieux and began to descend the Boulevard back to Nice.

"So your old friend Mariette has seen you!" she exclaimed, as soon as they had walked twenty paces from the house.

"Yes," he snapped. "Another illustration of my accursed luck. The sooner we leave Nice the better."

"Very well," she answered, with a weary sigh. She did not tell him that she had already ascertained from George Stratfield that "The Golden Hand" had been to Nice.

"We must leave for Paris," he said briefly. "It will not be wise to run too great a risk. If she chooses she can make things extremely unpleasant."

"For you?"

"No," he answered, turning quickly towards her. "For you."

She held her breath; the colour fled from her cheeks. He lost no opportunity of reminding her of the terrible past, and as he glanced at her and watched the effect of his words he saw with satisfaction that he still held her in a thralldom of fear.

"I thought she had left France," he continued, as if to himself. "I had no idea that she was still here. Fortune must have been kind to her of late."

Liane said nothing. She had not failed to notice his anxiety when Mademoiselle Bertholet had explained how Mariette had watched him, and she wondered whether, after all, he feared this remarkable woman who had played such a prominent part in their past lives; this notorious gambler who was her bitterest foe.

She was already tired of Nice, and recognised that to remain longer was only to endanger herself. The Nemesis she had so long dreaded seemed to be closing upon her.

In the Boulevard Carabacel they took an open cab to drive home, but while crossing the Place opposite the Post Office they encountered George Stratfield walking. As he passed he raised his hat to Liane, and she greeted him with a smile of sadness.

Zertho noticed the young Englishman, and his bearded face grew dark.

"What! So your lover is also here!" he exclaimed in surprise, turning to catch another glance of the well set-up figure in light grey tweed. She had carefully concealed from him and from her father the fact that George had come to Nice.

"Yes," she answered simply, looking straight before her.

"Why did you hide the truth from me?" he demanded angrily.

"Because the knowledge that he was here could not have benefited you," she answered.

"You have met him, of course, clandestinely," he said, regarding her with knit brows.

"I do not deny it."

"And you have told him, I hope, that you are to be my wife?"

"I have," she sighed.

"Then you must not meet again. You understand," he exclaimed fiercely. "Send the fellow back to London."

She bit her lip, but made no answer. Her eyes were filled with tears. Without any further words they drove rapidly along the Promenade, at that hour chill after the fading of the sun, until the cab with its jingling bells pulled up before the Pension, and Liane alighted. For an instant she turned to him, bowing, then entered the villa.

Her father was out, and on going into her own room she locked the door, cast down her sunshade, tossed her hat carelessly aside, and pushing her hair from her fevered brow with both hands, stood at the open window gazing aimlessly out upon the sea. A sense of utter loneliness crept over her forlorn heart. She was, she told herself, entirely friendless, now that her father desired her to marry Zertho. Hers had been at best a cheerless, melancholy life, yet it was now without either hope, happiness, or love. The sea stretching before her was like her own future, impenetrable, a great grey expanse, dismal and limitless, without a single gleam of brightness, growing every instant darker, more obscure, more mysterious.

Thoughts of the man she loved so fondly surged through her troubled mind. She remembered how sad and

melancholy he had looked when she had passed him by; how bitterly he had smiled when she bowed to him. The memory of his dear face brought back to her all the terrible past, all the hopelessness of the future, all the hideousness of the truth.

She sank beside her bed, and burying her face in the white coverlet gave way to her emotion, shedding a torrent of tears.

The dusk deepened, the twilight faded and darkness fell, still she sobbed on, murmuring constantly the name of the one man on earth she loved.

A low tapping at the door aroused her, and thinking it was her father she hastily dried her eyes and stumbled blindly across the dark room to admit him. It was, however, the Provençal *femme de chambre*, who handed her a note, saying in her quaint patois—

“A letter for Mademoiselle. It was brought a minute or two ago by a man who gave it to me, with strict injunctions to give it only into Mademoiselle’s own hands.”

“Thank you, Justine,” she answered, in a low hoarse voice, then, closing the door again, she lit a candle, and mechanically tearing open the note found that it was dated from the Villa Fortunée, Monaco, and signed by Mariette. In it the woman who was her enemy made a strange request. She first asked that she should say no word to her father or to Zertho regarding the receipt of the note or inform them of her address, and then, continuing, she wrote: “To-morrow, at two o’clock, call upon George Stratfield, who is, as you know, staying at the Grand Hotel, and he will bring you over here to my house. It is imperative that I should see you. Fear nothing, but come. George is my friend, and he will be awaiting you.”

Chapter Eighteen.

Sinned Against.

Liane’s first inclination was not to comply with the request, for knowing the crafty nature of this woman, she feared that the words had been written merely to place her off her guard. Yet immediately after luncheon at the Villa Chevrier on the following day she declared her intention of going down to the English library to get some books, and leaving her father and the Prince smoking over their liqueurs, went out upon the Promenade. As soon, however, as she was out of sight of the windows of the villa, she hailed a passing cab and drove to the Grand Hotel, where she found George sitting in a wicker-chair in the doorway, consoling himself by smoking a cigarette and awaiting her.

“You have come at last,” he cried, approaching the carriage. “Don’t get out. We will drive straight to the station,” and stepping in, he gave the man directions.

“What does this mean?” inquired Liane, eagerly.

“I cannot tell its meaning, dearest,” he answered. “I merely received a note, saying that you would call for me on your way to Monaco.”

“Have you no idea why she desires to see both of us?”

“None whatever,” he replied.

“You have found her,” she observed in a deep, earnest tone. “In my letter she says that you are her friend. You don’t know her true character, I suppose,” his well-beloved added, looking earnestly into his eyes. “If you did you would not visit her.”

“She lives in an air of the most severe respectability,” he said. “I dined at the Villa Fortunée the night before last, and found her an extremely pleasant hostess.”

She smiled. Then, while driving along the Avenue de la Gare to the station she told him of Mariette’s past in similar words to those used by Madame Bertholet. He sat listening eagerly, but a dark shadow crossed his features when, in conclusion, she added, “Such, unfortunately, is the woman who is to be bribed to marry you.”

They alighted, obtained their tickets, crossed the platform, and entered the *rapide*. It was crowded with people going to Monte Carlo, and the tunnels rendered the journey hot, dusty and unpleasant. Nevertheless the distance was not far, and when half-an-hour later they were ascending the steep winding way which led up to the rock of Monaco, Liane’s heart sank within her, for she feared that she was acting unwisely.

“It is very remarkable that Mariette should have written to us both in this manner,” George was saying as he strolled on beside the pale-faced graceful girl. “Evidently she desires to consult us upon some matter of urgency. Perhaps it concerns us both. Who knows?”

“It may,” she answered mechanically. “She is not, however, a person to trust. Women of her character have, alas! neither feeling nor honour.”

“Is she, then, so notoriously bad?” he asked in surprise.

“You know who and what I am,” she answered, turning to him, her grave grey eyes fixed upon his. “I have been forced against my inclination to frequent the gambling-rooms through months, nay years, and I knew Mariette Lepage long ago as the most vicious of all the women who hovered about the tables in search of dupes.”

By her manner he saw that she was annoyed, and jealous that he should have visited and dined with this woman so strangely referred to in his father's will, and he hastened to re-assure her that there was but one woman in the world for him.

"Then you will not marry her?" she cried eagerly. "Do not, for my sake. If you knew all you would rather cast the money into yonder sea than become her husband."

"Well," he said, "it is imperative that she should be offered the bribe to become my wife. If she refuses I shall gain fifty thousand pounds. I have thought of buying her refusal by offering to divide equally with her the sum I shall obtain."

"Excellent!" she cried, enthusiastically. "I never thought of that. If she will do so the cruel punishment your father intended will be turned to pleasure, and you will be twenty-five thousand pounds the richer."

"I will approach her," he said, after brief hesitation. "You know, darling, that I love you far too well to contemplate marriage with any other woman."

"But remember, I can never become your wife," she observed huskily, her eyes behind her veil filled to overflowing with tears. "I am debarred from that."

"Ah! no," he cried, "don't say that. Let us hope on."

"All hope within me is dead," she answered gloomily. "I care nothing now for the future. In a few brief days we are leaving here, and I shall say farewell, George, never again to meet you."

"You always speak so strangely and so dismally," he said. "You will never tell me anything of the reason you are so irrevocably bound to Zertho. In the old days at Stratfield you always took me into your confidence."

"Yes, yes," she answered, quickly. "I would tell you everything if I could—but I dare not. You would hate me."

"Hate you. Why?"

"You could no longer grasp my hand or kiss my lips," she faltered. "No, you must not, you shall not know, for I could not bear that you of all men should spurn me, leave me, and remember me only with loathing. I could not bear it. I would rather kill myself."

She was trembling, her breast rose and fell with the exertion of the steep ascent, and her face was blanched and haggard. Her attitude, whenever he referred to Zertho, always mystified and puzzled him. Had she not spoken vaguely of some strange crime?

Yet he loved her with all the strength of his being, and the sight of her terrible anxiety and dread pained him beyond measure. He was ready and willing to do anything to assist and liberate her from the mysterious thralldom, nevertheless she preserved a silence dogged and complete. He strove to discern a way out of the complicated situation, but could discover none.

"Have you ever been to the Villa Fortunée before?" he asked presently, after a long and painful silence, when they had crossed the sunny square before the Prince's palace, and were strolling along the road which skirted the rock with the small blue bay to their left and the white houses of Monte Carlo gleaming beyond.

"No," she answered. "I had no idea Mariette, 'The Golden Hand,' lived here. She used always to live at the little bijou villa in the Rue Cotta at Nice."

"The Golden Hand!" he exclaimed, laughing. "Why do you call her that?"

"It is the name she has earned at the tables because of her extraordinary good fortune," Liane answered. "Her winnings at trente-et-quarante are said to have been greater perhaps than any other player during the past few years."

At that moment the road turned sharply, almost at right angles, and Liane found herself before the great white house where lived the notorious gambler, the woman whose powdered, painted face every habitué of Monte Carlo knew so well, and whose luck was the envy of them all.

She read the name of the villa upon the marble tablet, and for a moment hesitated and held back, fearing to meet face to face the woman she held in fear. But George had already entered the gateway and ascended the steps, and she felt impelled to follow, a few moments later taking a seat in the cool handsome salon where the flowers diffused a sweet subtle perfume, and the light was softly tempered by the closed sun-shutters.

Liane and her lover sat facing each other, the silence being complete save for the swish of the sea as it broke ever and anon upon the brown rocks deep below. A moment later, however, there was a sound of the opening and shutting of doors, and with a frou-frou of silk there entered "The Golden Hand."

She wore an elegant dress of pale mauve trimmed with velvet, and as she came forward into the room a smile of welcome played upon her lips, but George thought she looked older and more haggard than when he had visited her only two days before.

Closing the door quietly behind her, she crossed almost noiselessly to where they were seated, and sinking upon a settee expressed pleasure at receiving their visit.

"I was not exactly certain whether you would come, you know," she exclaimed, with a coquettish laugh. "I was afraid Liane would refuse."

"You told me that you were her friend," he said.

"And that was the entire truth," she answered.

Liane faced her, her countenance pale, her lips parted. She had held back in fear when this woman had entered, but the calm expression and pleasant smile had now entirely disarmed her suspicions. Yet she feared lest this woman whom she had known in the old days, should divulge the secret she had kept from her lover. George, the man she adored, was, she knew, fast slipping away from her. On the one hand she was forced to marry Zertho, while on the other this very woman, whom she feared, was to be bribed to accept her lover as husband. Liane looked into her face and tried to read her thoughts. But her countenance had grown cold and mysterious.

"You were not always my friend," she said at last, in a low, strained tone.

"No, not always," the woman admitted, in English. "I have seldom been generous towards my own sex. I was, it is true, Liane, until recently, your enemy," she added, in a sympathetic tone. "I should be now if it were not for recent events."

"You intend, then, to prove my friend," Liane gasped excitedly, half-rising from her chair. "You—you will say nothing."

"On the contrary, I shall speak the truth."

"Ah, no," she wailed. "No, spare me that. Think! Think! surely my lot is hard enough to bear! Already I have lost George, the man I love."

"Your loss is my gain," Mariette Lepage said slowly. "You have lost a lover, while I have found a husband."

"And you will marry him—you?" she cried, dismayed.

"I know what are your thoughts," the other said. "My reputation is unenviable—eh?"

Liane did not answer; her lover sat rigid and silent.

"Well," went on the woman known at the tables as "The Golden Hand," "I cannot deny it. All that you see here, my house, my furniture, my pictures, the very clothes I wear, I have won fairly at the tables, because—well, because I am, I suppose, one of the fortunate ones. Others sit and ruin themselves by unwise play, while I sit beside them and prosper. Because of that, I am pointed out by men and women as a kind of extraordinary species, and shunned by all save the professional players to whom you and I belong. But," she added, gazing meaningfully at Liane, "you know my past as well as I know yours."

The words caused her to turn pale as death, while her breath came and went quickly. She was in momentary dread lest a single word of the terrible truth she was striving to hide should involuntarily escape her.

"Yes," Liane said, "I knew you well when I went daily to the Casino, and have often envied you, for while my father lost and lost you invariably won and crammed handfuls of notes into your capacious purse. At first I envied you, but soon I grew to hate you."

"You hated me, because even into my hardened heart love had found its way," she said reproachfully.

"I hated you because I knew that you loved only gold. I had seen sufficient of you to know that you had no higher thought than of the chances of the red or the black. You had been aptly nicknamed 'The Golden Hand.'"

"And I, too, envied you," the other said. "I envied you your grace and your beauty; yet often I felt sorry for you. You seemed so jaded and world-weary, although so young, that it was a matter of surprise that they gave you your carte at the Bureau."

"Now, strangely enough, we are rivals," Liane observed.

"Only because you are beneath the thrall of one who holds you in his power," Mariette answered. "You love each other so fervently that I could never be your rival, even if you were free."

"But, alas! I am not free," she said, in deep despondency, her eyes downcast, her head resting upon her hand.

"True," said the other, shrugging her shoulders. "Circumstances have combined to weave about you a web in which you have become enmeshed. You are held by bonds which, alone and unassisted, you cannot break asunder."

Liane, overcome with emotion she could no longer restrain, covered her face with her hands and burst into a torrent of tears. In an instant her lover was beside her, stroking her hair fondly, uttering words of sympathy and tenderness, and endeavouring to console her.

Mariette Lepage sat erect, motionless, silent, watching them.

"Ah!" she said slowly at length, "I know how fondly you love each other. I have myself experienced the same grief, the same bitterness as that which is rending your hearts at this moment, even though I am believed to be devoid of every passion, of every sentiment, and of every womanly feeling."

"Let me go!" Liane exclaimed, in a voice broken by sobs, rising unsteadily from her chair. "I—I cannot bear it."

"No, remain," the woman said in a firm tone, a trifle harsher than before. "I asked you here to-day because I wished to speak to you. I invited the man you love, because it is but just that he should hear what I have to say."

"Ah!" she sobbed bitterly. "You will expose me—you who have only just declared that you are my friend!"

"Be patient," the other answered. "I know your fear. You dread that I shall tell a truth which you dare not face."

She hung her head, sinking back rigidly into her chair with lips compressed. George stood watching her, like a man in a dream. He saw her crushed and hopeless beneath the terrible load upon her conscience, held speechless by some all-consuming terror, trembling like an aspen because she knew this woman intended to divulge her secret.

With all his soul he loved her, yet in those painful moments the gulf seemed to widen between them. Her white haggard face told him of the torture that racked her mind.

"Speak, Liane," he cried in a low intense tone. "What is it you fear? Surely the truth may be uttered?"

"No, no!" she cried wildly, struggling to her feet. "No, let me leave before she tells you. I knew instinctively that, after all, she was not my friend."

"Hear me before you judge," Mariette exclaimed firmly.

"Cannot you place faith in one who declares herself ready to assist you?" he added.

She shook her head, holding her breath the while, and glaring at him with eyes full of abject fear.

"Why?"

"Ah! don't ask me, George," she murmured, with her chin sunk upon the lace on her breast. "I am the most wretched woman on earth, because I have wilfully deceived you. I had no right to love you; no right to let you believe that I was pure and good; no right to allow you to place faith in me. You will hate me when you know all."

"For what reason?" he cried, dismayed.

"My life is overshadowed by evil," she answered vaguely, in a despairing voice. "I have sinned before God, and must bear the punishment."

"There is forgiveness for those who repent," the woman observed slowly, a hard, cold expression upon her face, as she watched the desperate girl trembling before her.

"There is none for me," she cried in utter despondency, haunted by fear, and bursting again into tears. "None! I can hope for no forgiveness."

At that instant the door of the room was opened, and two persons entered unannounced. George and Liane were standing together in the centre of the saloon, while Mariette was still seated with her back to the door, so that the new comers did not at first notice her presence.

The men were Brooker and Zertho.

"We have followed you here with your lover," exclaimed the Prince angrily, addressing Liane. "We saw you driving to the station together, and watched you. We—"

"The Golden Hand" hearing the voice, turned, and springing to her feet faced them.

"Mariette!" Zertho gasped, blanched and aghast, the words dying from his pale lips. In their eagerness to follow Liane and George they had entered the villa, not knowing that therein dwelt the woman from whom they intended on the morrow to fly.

Chapter Nineteen.

The Miniature.

Zertho gave her a single glance full of hatred, then, with a gesture of impatience after a few quick words, turned to make his exit. As he did so, however, he found himself face to face with a man who, standing in the doorway, resolutely barred his passage.

He stood glaring at him as one stupefied. The man was Max Richards.

"No," the latter said. "Now that you have chosen to call here uninvited it is at least polite to remain at the invitation of your hostess."

"Let me pass!" he cried threateningly.

"I shall not!" Richards answered with firmness, his back to the half-closed door, while Brooker stood watching the scene, himself full of fear and dismay.

"This is a conspiracy!" Zertho exclaimed, his trembling hands clenched, his face livid.

"Listen!" Mariette cried, her cheeks flushed with excitement as she stepped boldly forward and faced him. "This is a counterplot only to combat your dastardly intrigue. The innocent shall no longer suffer for the sins of the guilty."

"The guilty!" he echoed, with an insolent laugh. "You mean yourself!"

"I am not without blame, I admit," she answered quickly, her flashing eyes darting him an angry look. "Nevertheless, I have to-day determined to make atonement; to end for ever this conspiracy of silence." Then, turning to Liane, who was standing whitefaced and aghast, she said, "First, before I speak, it will be necessary for you to make confession. Explain to George of what nature is this bond which holds you to yonder man."

"No, I—I cannot," she protested, covering her face with her hands.

"But it is necessary," she urged. "Speak! Fear nothing. Then the truth shall be made known."

The slim, fair-faced girl stood with bent head, panting and irresolute, while all waited for the words to fall from her dry, white lips. At last, with eyes downcast, she summoned courage, and in a low, hoarse voice said,—

"Zertho compelled me to accept him because—because he can prove that my father murdered Charles Holroyde."

"Your father a murderer!" her lover echoed. "Impossible."

"Let me speak," Mariette interrupted, hastily. "Two winters ago I met in Nice a wealthy young Englishman named Holroyde. We saw one another often at Monte Carlo, and our acquaintance ripened into love. He offered me marriage, and I accepted; but one night, after winning a considerable sum, he returned to Nice about eleven o'clock, was waylaid in a narrow lane running from the Promenade des Anglais into the Rue de France, robbed and murdered. Thus was the man I loved cruelly snatched from me just at the moment when happiness was in my reach; just within a few weeks of making me his wife. This villa, which I have since bought, he designated as our home, and this ring upon my finger is the one he gave me. The crime, enshrouded in mystery, has not yet been forgotten either by the police or the people of Nice. It seemed amazing that such a dastardly assassination could take place so swiftly without a single person hearing any cry, yet the police had no clue. The murderer, who had no doubt accompanied or followed his victim from Monte Carlo, must have struck him down with unerring blow and escaped, leaving no trace behind. Yet there was nevertheless a witness of the deed—a witness who is present."

"A witness!" gasped Liane.

"Yes," Mariette said. "Max Richards will tell you what he saw."

The man indicated, still standing with his back to the door, smiled triumphantly at Zertho, then said,—

"Yes, it is true. I witnessed the murder of Charles Holroyde. On that night I had left the Café de la Régence, and crossing the road overtook, in the Avenue de la Gare, Nelly Bridson, Captain Brooker's adopted daughter. We had met before on several occasions, and after she had told me that she had been to a chemist's to obtain something for Liane, who was not well, I offered, as it was late, to accompany her as far as her house in the Rue Dalpozzo. To this she made no objection, and we walked together along the Rue de France as far as the corner of the street wherein she lived. The moon, however, was bright upon the sea, and at my suggestion she consented to accompany me for a stroll along the Promenade. To reach the latter we had to pass through a narrow lane, which we had just entered, when we saw straight before us figures of men struggling together. Instantly I dragged Nelly back into the deep shadow where we could see without being observed. Suddenly I heard one of the men cry in English 'My God! I'm stabbed!' and he staggered back and fell. Then, discerning for the first time that the man had been attacked by two assailants, I rushed forward, but already they had bent and secured the contents of their victim's pocket, and as I approached one of them threw the knife away. That man I recognised in the moonlight as Captain Brooker!"

A low groan escaped the lips of the pale-faced, agitated man who had been thus denounced, and he stood paralysed by fear, clutching the back of a chair for support.

"The man, however, who threw away the knife he had snatched up, was not the murderer," Richards continued, in a clear, calm voice. "Both Nelly and myself were afterwards in complete accord that it was his companion who had, in the mêlée, struck the fatal blow. The murderer was the man there—Zertho d'Auzac."

"It's a lie!" cried the man indicated, "a foul, abominable falsehood! Brooker crept up behind him and tried to gag him with a scarf, when, finding that he was too powerful for him, he struck him full in the breast. In an instant he was dead."

"Your story is an entire fabrication," Richards answered, in a deprecatory tone. "We were both quite close to you, and saw your murderous face in the moonlight at the moment when you killed your victim. To us it seemed as though you alone had acted with premeditation, and that instead of assisting you, Brooker was endeavouring to release Holroyde, for I heard him cry in dismay, 'Good God! Zertho, what are you doing?' It was you who bent and secured the notes, while Brooker snatched up the knife, held it for an instant in hesitation, then seeing me approach in the darkness, flung it away and fled after you. I sped along the Promenade for some distance, leaving Nellie beside the prostrate man, but you both escaped, and when I returned she had gone. She had, I suppose, rushed home, fearing to be discovered there. But the young Englishman was already lifeless, therefore I left the spot hurriedly. Next morning, when the town was in a state of great excitement over the murdered Englishman, Nelly called at my rooms and begged me to say nothing to the police, because she felt certain the Captain would be arrested and convicted as an accessory. Therefore, in obedience to her wish, I have kept my knowledge secret until such time as I should choose to make the truth known."

"Is that the actual truth?" Brooker asked, agape in wonderment.

"It is the entire truth of what I saw with my own eyes—of what I am prepared to swear in any court of justice."

"So confused were the memories of that terrible incident that I have all along believed that I myself was the actual murderer," said the Captain. "That night I had drunk more wine than usual, and remember very little of the occurrence save that I held the knife in my hand, and that on the following morning when I awoke I found my hands stained with blood, while in my pocket were some of the stolen notes. Zertho told me, when we met next day, that, in a frenzy of madness at having lost almost every sou I possessed, I had attacked Holroyde suddenly, murdered him, and filched his winnings from his pocket. He said, however, he would preserve my secret, and did so until a few weeks ago, when Liane refused to become his wife. Then he declared that if I did not compel her to marry him he would denounce me. I begged him to at least spare Liane, but he was inexorable. Therefore I was compelled to make confession to her, and she, rather than I should pay the terrible penalty, sacrificed all her love and happiness for my sake."

His voice was broken with emotion, and although his lips moved, he could utter no further words.

George, standing beside his well-beloved, grasped her tiny hand and pressed it tenderly. At last he knew the secret of her acceptance of Zertho's offer, and recognised all the tortures she must have suffered in order to save her father from degradation and shame.

"He lies!" Zertho cried, his sallow face bloodless. He saw how ingeniously he had been entrapped. "It was he himself who killed Holroyde."

"If so," exclaimed Max Richards, "why have you paid me so well for my silence?"

He did not reply.

"You are silent," he went on. "Then I will tell you. You were shrewd enough to see that while I held my tongue you would still hold Captain Brooker in your power, and through the pressure you could place upon him, secure Liane as your wife. I knew this all along, although you believed me to be entirely ignorant of it. Still I allowed you to pay me, and I can assure you that the money you gave me with such bad grace often came in very useful," he laughed. "I am not a Prince, and although I may be an adventurer, I thank Heaven I'm not an assassin."

"I paid you all you demanded, every penny, yet now you turn upon me. It is the way of all blackmailers," Zertho cried, still livid with anger.

"I speak the truth in order to save from your merciless clutches one woman whose fair name has never been besmirched. I speak for Liane's sake."

Zertho turned from him with a fierce imprecation on his lips, declaring that the whole story was a tissue of falsehoods, and denouncing his companion Brooker as the actual assassin.

"You forget," said Richards, "that in addition to myself there was a second witness, Nelly Bridson, the girl with whom your victim had carried on a mild and harmless flirtation prior to meeting Mariette. You forget that she was with me, and actually saw you commit the deed."

This truth rendered him voiceless.

"May I, in future, enjoy an absolutely clear conscience that I had no hand in the actual crime?" the Captain asked earnestly, turning to Richards.

"Certainly," he answered, quickly. "Both Nelly and myself saw every movement clearly, for the moon was shining bright as day. We heard you shout in horror and dismay to the assassin; we saw the blow struck; we saw the theft committed, and watched you pick up the knife, which you threw down again instantly at the moment when I rushed forward."

"I was, alas, only half-conscious of my actions," he answered. "But the enormity of the crime must have sobered me instantly, for I remember a man approaching—who it was I was not aware until this moment—and knowing that we had been discovered and were in peril, flew for my life back to the Promenade, reaching home by a circuitous route about midnight."

"You need have no further fear of this man," Richards assured him. "His plan was ingenious, to shift the crime from his own shoulders to yours, and at the same time to marry Liane, but fortunately his own actions convict him. Liane has shown bravery and self-denial, which should further endear her to the heart of the man who loves her, and if the truth I have told brings back her happiness and peace of mind I shall not have spoken in vain."

"I have much to thank you for," Liane faltered, her face bright with a new-born happiness. "You have indeed revived within me hope, life and love. I knew this man was crafty and cruel, but I never dreamed that he himself had committed the crime with which he charged my father. I saw that he was inexorable and relentless, and was compelled to wrench myself from George, whom I loved, and promise to become the wife of—of this assassin."

"Assassin!" cried Zertho. "No, the prospect of becoming Princess d'Auzac proved too attractive for you! It was because both you and your father wanted money and position, that you were ready to become my wife."

"We desired nothing from you," she answered proudly. "Both of us detested you when you found us in England, and thrust yourself upon us. Upon the gold of the guilty there always lies a curse."

But shrugging his shoulders contemptuously, he said nothing. He fidgetted, anxious to escape, for although he preserved a calm, insolent, almost indifferent manner, he nevertheless knew that concealment of the truth was now

no longer possible. At the very instant when he had felt his position the most secure, his perfidy, his cunning, and his crime had been laid bare before them all.

He clenched his hands, muttering an oath behind his set teeth, while his dark eyes, with a glance of hatred in them, flashed with an unnatural brilliance.

For a few moments no one spoke. The silence was complete save for the roar of the waves on the rocks outside and the sobs that now and then escaped Liane. She clung to George, burying her beautiful head upon his shoulder.

At last Mariette spoke, saying,—

“There is yet another fact which is, in itself, sufficient proof of this man’s unscrupulousness. One witness of his crime still lives; the other, Nelly Bridson, is dead. Nelly was once my friend. Unknown to Captain Brooker I knew her intimately as a bright girl months before Charles Holroyde met and admired her. Indeed, it was by her that I was introduced to the man who afterwards loved me, and was so brutally done to death. When at last she became aware that her lover had forsaken her some ill-feeling arose between us. I knew that she must hate me, but I treated her jealousy with unconcern, and remained towards her the same as before. In my heart, however, I envied her her youth and good looks, and feared that Charles Holroyde might return to his first love. But, alas! he was murdered mysteriously—by whom I knew not, until three days ago, when Max Richards divulged to me the truth. Then I resolved that punishment should fall upon the guilty. Well, I hated Nelly because I knew that Holroyde had admired her, and I likewise hated Liane, entertaining a suspicion that because she always avoided me she had spoken of me detrimentally to the man whom I loved. After Holroyde’s death I left the Riviera and went to Paris, to Wiesbaden, to Vienna, caring little whither I went, until at last, about a year afterwards, I returned to Monte Carlo, and heard from one of Captain Brooker’s friends that he and the girls had left long ago for England, where they had resolved to live in the future. Immediately after my lover’s death luck had forsaken me entirely, and I passed a spurious bank-note for a large amount at Marseilles. The police were endeavouring to find me, and it was to avoid arrest that I was travelling. I wrote several times to Nelly and received replies, stating how happy they were in their country home in England, and how much more peaceful and enjoyable it was than at Nice. Still there was one matter upon which I desired to see her, a matter connected with the family of the man who was dead. He had, I believed, told her of his relations in England, but he had spoken no word of them to me. I had in my possession a Cosway miniature he had one day left at my house, an antique portrait of an elderly lady, beautifully painted on ivory and set round with brilliants. He had mentioned to me that it was an heirloom, and I desired to return it to the family if I could find them. With that object I went to England, and one summer’s evening met Nelly by appointment in a country lane a short distance from Stratfield Mortimer.”

“You met her?” Captain Brooker exclaimed. “She never told me so.”

“She had, alas, no opportunity,” Mariette answered. “For it was on that evening she met with her death. She had ridden her cycle, and I found her resting in the gateway she had indicated in her letter. She seemed unusually nervous, I noticed, nevertheless I attributed it to the fact that she regarded me as her rival, even though the man we both loved was dead. For nearly an hour we remained together chatting, until the sunset faded and dusk crept on. I asked her what the man had told her regarding his family, and showed her the antique miniature. Then she told me a fact which held me speechless in amazement. Charles Holroyde was no other than the son of a man living close by that spot, Sir John Stratfield.”

“My brother!” cried George. “Impossible!”

“It was the truth. He had told her everything. The father of Charles Holroyde was actually living within a mile of that spot, and the portrait was one of Lady Anne Stratfield, a noted beauty, which was painted by the fashionable miniaturist, Cosway, shortly before his death. At first I could not credit that he was actually Sir John’s son, but she brought proof positive to show that what she said was correct, and at her request I gave her the miniature to return to Sir John. She promised to call next day and give it into his hands, saying that it came from a person who desired to remain anonymous.”

“Why did you not come to the Court yourself?” George asked quickly.

“I had no desire to meet the father of my dead lover,” she replied.

“But he must have been acquainted with you, because he mentioned you in his will.”

“Yes,” she answered reflectively, “he must, I suppose, have known of me.”

“Then what occurred afterwards?” Brooker eagerly inquired. “Tell us the events of that night in their proper sequence.”

“After we had talked for some time, she telling me how happy both she and Liane were, and how the latter had become engaged clandestinely to the Baronet’s son, George, she rode beside me as far as the lodge gates of the Court, where we parted. Then she remounted and rode back in the direction of the spot where she was afterwards discovered, while I strolled slowly on to the station, whence I returned to London. It was dusk before I left Stratfield Mortimer, but as I changed at Reading to enter the train for Paddington, I caught a glimpse of a face I thought I knew. It was only for a single instant, but the face was one that once seen is never forgotten. It was the face of Zertho.”

“You saw me!” he gasped.

“Yes. You were in a crowd on Reading platform, and were about to enter the same train as myself, but changing your mind, suddenly left the station hurriedly,” she said. “At that time, remember, I had no idea that you were in England, for Nelly had not mentioned your visit. Two days later, however, I was appalled by reading in the papers that poor

Nelly had been murdered almost immediately after I had left her, and quite close to the spot where we had at first stood. Afterwards in the report of the inquest, I saw that you were present and had given evidence. Then there was silence. The affair was an enigma, and the police possessed no clue. The papers mentioned a broad mark a foot wide upon the dust, which they regarded as mysterious. It was made by my skirt which swept the road. I alone held the key to the enigma. In order to assure myself that my suspicions were not unfounded, I returned to Reading, made careful inquiries there, and when I had satisfied myself, left England with the knowledge I had obtained still in my possession."

"What did you discover?" inquired George, quickly, while Liane still clung to him tremblingly.

"I discovered absolute proof of the identity of Nolly's assassin. It was Zertho d'Auzac!"

Chapter Twenty.

At Cross Lane.

"You lie!" the Prince cried indignantly. "There is no proof."

"Listen!" Mariette retorted in a firm, harsh tone, gazing at him steadily. "Listen while I recall to your memory the events of that fateful night. In my inquiries I traced your progress step by step, and every movement is entirely plain to me. You went to England with solely one object in view, namely, to get rid of Nelly Bridson, the woman who could convict you of murder."

"I deny that I had any hand whatever in the affair," he protested. "Why, she went with me to the station and saw me off to Reading! It was given in evidence that the police inquired of the station officials at Stratfield Mortimer, and also at Reading, and were entirely satisfied that there was no suspicion upon me. Therefore, whatever you say is utterly worthless," he added, turning from her contemptuously.

"We shall see," she replied. "If you have so conveniently forgotten what your movements were, I will describe them. It is quite true that Nelly saw you off to Reading. But prior to this, while alone in the dining-room of Captain Brooker's cottage, you found lying about the letter I had written her making the appointment. Curiosity prompted you to read its contents, and you therefore knew that at seven o'clock she would be in Cross Lane. You bade her farewell at eight minutes past six, and your train arrived at Reading at twenty minutes past. You immediately took a fly back towards Stratfield, but dismissed the man at Threemile Cross, and after watching the conveyance out of sight, took a cut across the fields for about a mile and a half to Cross Lane, thus completely doubling. It was growing dark when you reached the railway bridge, but you saw your victim coming from the opposite direction, and drew back half-way up the steep ascent, where you knew she must pass slowly. Suspecting no danger, the light-hearted girl allowed her machine to run swiftly down the incline, then pedalled hard for the ascent, when suddenly you raised your weapon, took deliberate aim and fired. With a cry she dropped sideways on her feet, the machine falling with her. Then she blindly staggered forward two or three paces, and sank to earth, dying. For an instant you waited, but even while you looked the poor girl sighed heavily and passed away. Then, fearing detection, you turned and fled back across the fields to Reading station, where I saw you an hour later."

"It's an absolute falsehood!" he cried. "I went direct to London after leaving the girl."

"You did not, for I found the man who drove you to Threemile Cross, and who will give evidence against you on your trial."

"You have!" he gasped. "You will hand me over to the police?" he added hoarsely.

"Certainly," she answered, firmly. "The police of Reading and the police of Nice will alike be anxious to give you free lodgings in a chamber scarcely as comfortable as any in the Villa Chevrier. For a good many months the mystery of Charles Holroyde's death has puzzled them, but it will remain an enigma no longer."

"Then Brooker will suffer also," he cried.

"No, he will not," replied the inventor of "The Agony of Monte Carlo," quickly. "My evidence will prevent that. I saw you commit the murder, and likewise witnessed how Brooker endeavoured to prevent you."

"Again," cried Mariette, "there is yet another fact. From inquiries I have made it is plain that some months prior to Nelly's death she, by word or action, had betrayed her knowledge of your crime committed in Nice."

"I recollect now," cried Liane, suddenly. "She always loathed Zertho, a fact which often caused me some surprise, he having made her several handsome presents after his sudden change of fortune. Once, too, I chanced to remark in jest that I might possibly become Princess d'Auzac, whereupon she answered, 'No, never. I could prevent that.'"

"This exactly proves my contention," exclaimed Mariette, excitedly turning to the others. "Nelly had betrayed her knowledge of his secret, and he was in deadly fear of her. He committed the second crime so that the first should remain concealed. It was not until months afterwards, when Richards disclosed his identity, and, having had a run of ill-luck at the tables, offered to preserve silence for a momentary consideration, that he knew there was a second witness. Nelly had never told him that she had a companion on that fateful night, and he felt assured that the man who had so suddenly sprung upon them could not again identify him. Only when Richards came forward did he realise the truth that in taking Nelly Bridson's life he had failed to efface his first crime, and had placed himself in deadlier peril."

A deep silence fell. The man accused stood motionless, his dark, sallow face livid, his eyes, with a haunting look of

abject terror in them, fixed upon the carpet. His hands were clenched, his head bent, his body rigid. This sudden and unexpected exposure held him dumb.

At last Liane spoke in a low musical voice, a little strained perhaps, but her tone showed that at last the crushing weight of Zertho's accusation of her father had been lifted from her mind, and she already felt her freedom to love George Stratfield.

"There is yet one thing unexplained," she said. "I have a confession to make."

"A confession!" gasped her lover. "What?"

"On that fatal evening when poor Nelly was so brutally killed I had an appointment to meet you at the spot," she answered. "And I kept it."

"You did? Why, I thought you were prevented."

"I was, but I arrived there late. Unconscious of the fearful tragedy, I walked there, and in the twilight waited in the gateway leading to the meadow, the very spot where Mariette and Nelly had been standing an hour before. While there the high wind blew my hair about and several of the pins fell out. I picked them up, all save one—the one you discovered."

"It was yours!" he cried dismayed.

"Yes, mine," she replied. "I waited there alone about ten minutes, then passed beneath the railway bridge and there saw straight before me, a little way beyond, Nelly lying beside her machine. We had quarrelled earlier in the day over a trifling matter and she had uttered some rather insulting words: therefore, believing that she had merely had a fall and would recover in a few minutes, I left her lying where she was. I saw no blood, and never dreamt that she was dead. At her throat was the brooch Charles Holroyde had given her, an ornament upon which she set great store. Suddenly the temptation to annoy her came over me, and I bent and snatched it off. At that moment you had already discovered the crime, and gone for assistance. It was my intention to keep the brooch, so that she might believe it had been stolen. Judge my horror when a few hours later I knew the ghastly truth, while in my possession there remained the missing brooch about which the papers afterwards made so many comments. Again, the hairpin you discovered being one of mine was still another fact which caused me the greatest terror, lest the police should ascertain from whose hair the pin had fallen. In order to make it appear that I had not been to Cross Lane I that night wrote a letter to you regretting that I was prevented from meeting you, and early next morning tore it into fragments and cast it at the roadside, where it was subsequently discovered by the detectives. Yet the fear that the brooch might be discovered in my possession was ever upon me, so one night I took all my remaining pins, together with the brooch, and buried them in the garden, where, I suppose, they still remain. Ever since that day until now I have feared lest my theft should be discovered and my presence at the scene of the tragedy proved, for I saw how suspicious were the circumstances, especially as we had had a slight difference earlier that day and someone might have overheard our high words. For months my life has been overshadowed by a terrible dread, but now that I know the truth I hesitate no longer to speak."

"And the miniature we discovered by Nelly's side was the one you gave her to return to my family?" George exclaimed, turning quickly to Mariette, astounded at the remarkable explanation.

"Yes. She said she knew you, and that you loved Liane. Therefore she would return it to your father without stating whence it had come."

"But you say that Charles Holroyde was my brother," he exclaimed, puzzled. "I do not understand."

"Think for a moment, and you will see that all I have spoken is the truth," she answered. "Before his death he told me the whole of the circumstances; how your mother, Lady Stratfield, died a few months after your birth, and how your father, a year afterwards, married another lady, whom he subsequently divorced. The latter, a lady of means, came and lived in France, where Charles was educated, but when he knew how unjustly your father had treated his mother he declined to take the name of Stratfield, and preferred his mother's maiden name. He—"

"Ah, yes, I remember?" cried George, amazed. "It was my father's unhappy second marriage that had caused him to become gloomy, misanthropic, and a hater of womankind. The subject was scarcely ever mentioned between us, but now I distinctly remember that the lady's name was Holroyde. I knew that she had a son, but have always been led to suppose that he died when only a few months old."

"No," Mariette replied. "He was foully murdered for the money he had won at roulette by that man standing there," and she pointed towards Zertho, who stood trembling, crushed by her terrible denunciation.

"Fancy poor Charlie Holroyde actually being your brother!" Liane exclaimed, looking up tenderly into the face of the man she so fondly loved. "Yet it is not surprising, for, strangely enough, I have many times thought that your face strongly resembled his. But my father is cleared of the terrible stigma, and no suspicion can now be cast upon me, therefore we have nothing to fear."

"True, darling," he answered. "We have nothing to fear, save one thing."

"What is that?" she inquired eagerly.

He hesitated. His words were overheard by all in the room, and every eye was upon him. The man accused moved across to the table and stood leaning against it, swaying unsteadily. His passage was still barred resolutely.

"You forget the offer of marriage which, under my father's will, I am compelled to make to Mariette, if I am not to

remain a pauper all my days.”

As he spoke there was a quick movement behind him, a flood of golden sunlight suddenly lit up the room as the jealousies of one of the windows were dashed open, and as he turned he saw the figure of Zertho disappearing through the window.

With a cry, the fugitive leaped down upon the flower-bed outside, hat in hand, and an instant later had gained the road and was flying down through the fortifications towards La Condamine.

For scarcely a second Max Richards hesitated, then rushed after him to give him into the hands of the police. Zertho had long been watching his opportunity, and, being strong and athletic, had reached the window at a single bound, and had escaped almost before they could realise what had occurred.

For a few moments all were dismayed, but were quickly reassured by Mariette, who declared that the police must sooner or later arrest him.

Then, turning to George, she added,—

“You have spoken of your father’s will. Well, your solicitors may make the offer, but I shall refuse.”

“You will refuse!” cried Liane, joyously.

“Yes,” she answered, smiling in contentment. “I shall refuse because I am already engaged to marry Max, the man whose words have cleared your father, and whose evidence will convict the man who has held you so long beneath the thrall of terror.”

“You are to marry Max!” Liane exclaimed, surprised.

“Yes. We have known each other some years now, and as I have recently won sufficient money which, invested, will bring us in a modest income, we have agreed to marry and relinquish gambling. One of our promises to each other is that after marriage neither of us shall enter the Casino on any pretext whatsoever. I shall certainly keep it, and I feel assured that Max will.”

“I’m sure you have our heartiest congratulations,” Captain Brooker said, smiling. “I’ve known Max a long time, and although once he has been one of us and an outsider, he is, nevertheless, at heart a gentleman.”

Mariette, known as “The Golden Hand,” and believed by *habitués* of Monte Carlo to be thoroughly unscrupulous, and an adventuress of the very worst type, was now an entirely different person to the woman who flung down her gold so recklessly upon the tables. Her life had not been altogether blameless, nevertheless there was still sufficient generosity, tenderness, and love within her heart to render her a devoted wife with a man who would love and cherish her.

“Make your offer to marry me as soon as you wish,” she laughed. “You know what my reply will be.”

“A reply,” he said, “that will bring me fifty thousand pounds.”

“You are indeed my friend, Mariette,” Liane said, stretching forth her hand. “Forgive me for believing that you were my enemy.”

The other grasped it warmly, answering,—

“I have forgiven all—everything save the terrible offences of the man who has fled, offences before God and man that are beyond atonement.”

Chapter Twenty One.

Red and Black.

The fugitive was already out of sight when his pursuer gained the road. In the crooked streets of Monaco, with their dark arches, narrow passages and steep inclines, it is easy to evade pursuit, and Zertho, to whom the place was well-known, was fully aware that if he could gain the foot of the rock he could get clean away. He crushed his hat on his head and ran swiftly as a deer.

Max knew the road the accused man must take, and dashed after him, hatless, as fast as his legs would carry him. Suddenly, however, he entered a crooked lane, only to find himself in a *cul-de-sac*. He quickly retraced his steps and gained the square in front of the Palace, but by this time the man he was pursuing was already at the foot of the rock. Rushing up to the wall of the fortifications he peered over, and saw far below the fugitive spring into a open cab and drive rapidly towards La Condamine. To overtake him now was impossible. The police must take up the chase.

He ran back to the Villa Fortunée to tell Mariette and the others of his failure and obtain her sanction to invoke the aid of police, while the other sat bolt upright in the cab, staring straight before him, not daring to glance behind. Yet all seemed peaceful in that calm sunset hour. Along the boulevard around the bay he drove at a spanking pace, but in front the road to Monte Carlo rose steeply, and soon they were only travelling at walking pace.

“Quicker!” he cried, impatiently to the driver; and with an oath added: “Whip your horses! Quicker!”

“Impossible, m’sieur,” the man answered without turning towards him.

The moments that went by during that slow ascent seemed hours. Each instant he expected to hear loud cries and demands as the police bore down upon him. He knew that his face must betray the deadly terror that held him paralysed. Like a fox going to cover he had headed instinctively for Monte Carlo, but knew not how he was about to act, or whither he was going. He knew that he must fly to save his liberty and life, and had a vague idea that if he crossed into Italy the pursuit would thereby be delayed.

"Where to, m'sieur?" inquired the driver, when at last they gained the brow of the hill.

"The Casino! Quick!" he answered, after an instant's reflection. Then to himself, he muttered behind his set teeth: "One throw. My last chance. Life or death!"

He sprang from the cab, tossed the man a ten-franc piece, and ran up the red-carpeted steps to the atrium, showed his white ticket to the two doorkeepers, and entered the hot, garish gaming-rooms.

The atmosphere was troubled, faint with the thousand perfumes exhaled from the tightly-laced corsets of the women. Charming and pretty as many of the latter are, they are, nevertheless, designedly or unconsciously, the most active and dangerous companions at the tables. Their influence upon their fellow-players is always on the side of the bank.

Queen Roulette is the most absorbing and most imperious of all mistresses. The most determined, young or old, audacious or timid, find themselves powerless to resist her, for when the fatal fascination creeps upon them she engages their brain, saps their spirit, holds captive their senses, breaks asunder their resolutions, and lures them to their ruin. She is indeed an enchantress infernal.

The jingle and chatter jarred upon his unstrung nerves. For a moment he stood nauseated, half-dazed by the thousand memories, hideous spectres of a guilty past, that crowded upon him.

But again he walked forward blindly, on past several of the tables encircled by their hot, eager crowds, until he came to the Moorish room. As he was passing a man rose wearily from the roulette-table with a roll of notes in his hand, and instantly he took his chair. He cast a furtive glance around the circle of faces, pale beneath the green-shaded oil lamps suspended from the long brass chains. The emotions of hope, disgust, anxiety, or greed were displayed on each of the perspiring countenances ranged around that table. Next him was a beautiful woman well-known in Riviera society, winning, and therefore a little excited, her cheeks burning with two bright spots, her eyes shining like lamps; and she looked like a girl as she now and then heaved a deep sigh. Next her a blotchy-faced man, smelling strongly of rank cigars, was playing and losing heavily, his countenance betraying nothing more than a half-hearted smile, while opposite a staid matron made room for her daughter, and handed her money to put on, believing, as so many believe, that innocence is a kind of "mascot."

He lowered his gaze. The deathly pallor of his own cheeks had attracted notice. It seemed as though these people, many of them personally known to him, held him in suspicion.

He paused in hesitation, holding his breath the while, trying to calm the wild tumultuous throbbing of his heart.

"Messieurs, faites vos jeux!"

The red and black disc in the centre of the table was revolving, the money was already placed within the squares, and the little ivory ball had already been launched when, with sudden resolve, he drew from his pocket a louis and tossed it carelessly upon the scarlet diamond.

"Gain, I fly!" he murmured to himself. "Lose, I remain."

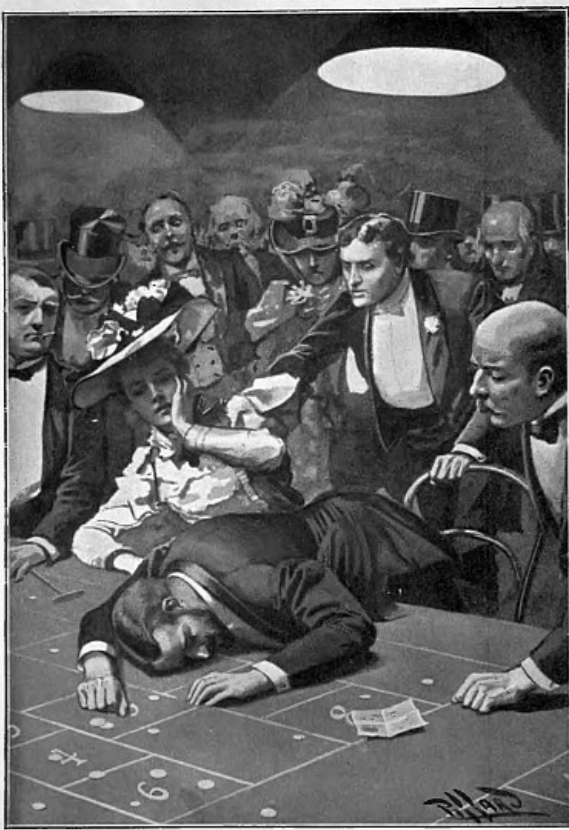
In flinging the coin his hand had lost its deftness, for instead of falling flat, it fell upon its edge and rolled from the "red" over the line into the "impair."

At that instant sounded the monotonous wearying cry,—

"Rien ne va plus!"

Then there was a moment's hush, the ball fell with a click into its socket, and the croupier's rake came swiftly before his fevered eyes and swept away the coin he had staked.

He had lost, and would remain.



“HE FELL FORWARD UPON THE TABLE LIFELESS, SCATTERING THE GOLD, SILVER AND NOTES STAKED BY THE PLAYERS.”

P. 284.

IF SINNERS ENTICE THEE.

Glancing round, his lips curled in a bitter smile; at the same moment, however, he placed his trembling hand to his mouth, as if to stifle an imprecation.

Glaring, rigid and desperate he sat, his dark eyes, the eyes that had been so admired by the women, fixed upon the ever-revolving disc of black and red now holding him in fascination. Suddenly, as another game was being played, a spasm of excruciating pain caused him to clap both hands to his brow and utter a low groan. It was the gasp of a dying man, but amid the terrible excitement of play it passed unnoticed, and none dreamed the truth until a moment or two later when, with a wild, despairing shriek which rang through the hot gilded rooms and caused an instant's hush, he half-rose from his chair and fell forward upon the table lifeless, scattering the gold, silver and notes staked by the players, and causing a terrible scene of alarm and confusion.

His heart had always been weak, and the sudden excitement of play had caused a rupture which had proved fatal.

Such was the official account of the affair given in the papers, for the administration of the Casino were careful not to let the public know that in the dead man's pocket was found a tiny bottle labelled "Quinine," containing several white tablets which, on analysis, were found to be of strychnine.

Nevertheless, it is not surprising that the public remained in ignorance of this last-mentioned fact, when it is remembered that the Administration of the Cercle des Etrangers spends some hundreds of thousands of francs annually among the journals and journalists in order to conceal the many suicides which take place in their world-famous combination of paradise and hell.

Chapter Twenty Two.

Conclusion.

George and Liane, fervent in their newly-found happiness, were married shortly afterwards in the village church of Stratfield Mortimer, the old time-worn place where for generations his family had been christened, married, and placed to rest, each latter event being recorded upon the tarnished monumental brasses. By Mariette's refusal he received the sum stipulated by his father's will, and for a year they lived high up on Sydenham Hill, in a house which set its face towards the deep valley wherein murky London lies ever beneath its smoke-pall, George journeying each day to his gloomy chambers into which no ray of sunlight had ever been known to penetrate.

By the death of his elder brother, the result of an accident while hunting last winter, he, however, suddenly found himself the possessor of Stratfield with its handsome income, and to-day both he and Liane live at the Court, and are prominent figures in the county. Liane's sweet, beautiful face, graceful bearing and vivacious *chic*, cause her to be admired everywhere, and among the many charming young hostesses of Berkshire no one is so popular.

Mariette, no longer known as "The Golden Hand," has married Max Richards, and still lives in her pretty villa where the salon windows open upon the blue Mediterranean. Each spring Liane and George spend a few weeks with them, while they, in return, come to England in summer, and are welcome guests at Stratfield.

Through many months it was a profound mystery how old Sir John became aware of Mariette's existence, but this was cleared up quite unexpectedly one day by George, who, in turning over some of his father's papers, discovered a letter written by his unknown brother Charles, who informed the old Baronet that he had lost a considerable sum at cards to a certain Captain Brooker, and also stated that he was about to marry, and gave Mariette's name and some facts concerning her. From this letter the old gentleman would no doubt suspect her to be an adventuress, and therefore, in his paroxysm of anger at George's refusal to renounce Liane, he made a provision in his will that this unknown woman should marry him, instead of the son he had discarded, and of whose death he was unaware.

In the great oak-panelled drawing-room at Stratfield, with its quaint diamond panes, deep-set mullioned windows and polished floor, there now hangs Cosway's beautiful miniature of Lady Anne, and each time husband and wife glance at it they remember how very near they once were to eternal separation and blank despair. But devoted to one another, their life is now one of unalloyed happiness. The clouds have lifted, and their days are as bright and joyous as they once long ago imagined in their day-dreams. The Captain is back in his old-fashioned ivied cottage in the village, but dines each evening at the Court, where the cigars are choice and the wines well-matured. Only once have George and Liane walked together to that fateful spot beyond the railway bridge in Cross Lane. But for both of them its sight brought back memories so bitter that by mutual agreement they now always avoid passing that unfrequented way.

To that estimable body of men, the Berkshire Constabulary, the motive of the assassination of Nelly Bridson and the identity of her assassin remain still a mystery, as they will for ever.

The End.

[Chapter 1](#) | [Chapter 2](#) | [Chapter 3](#) | [Chapter 4](#) | [Chapter 5](#) | [Chapter 6](#) | [Chapter 7](#) | [Chapter 8](#) | [Chapter 9](#) | [Chapter 10](#) | [Chapter 11](#) | [Chapter 12](#) | [Chapter 13](#) | [Chapter 14](#) | [Chapter 15](#) | [Chapter 16](#) | [Chapter 17](#) | [Chapter 18](#) | [Chapter 19](#) | [Chapter 20](#) | [Chapter 21](#) | [Chapter 22](#) |

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