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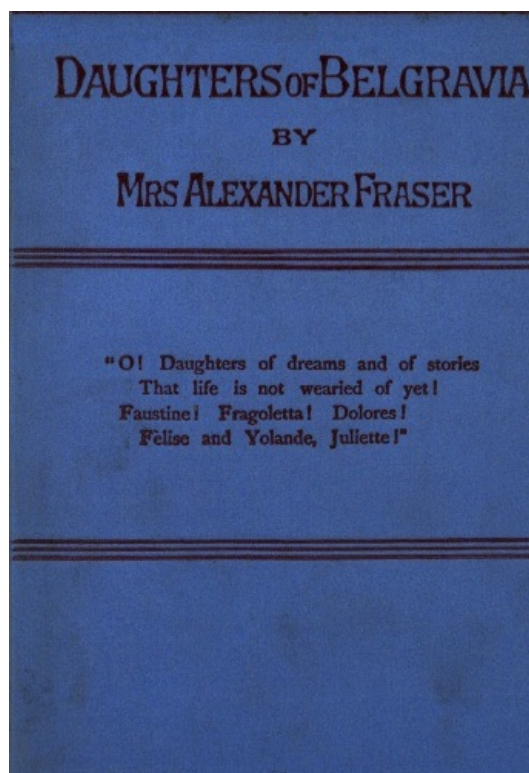
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DAUGHTERS OF BELGRAVIA.

DAUGHTERS OF BELGRAVIA

BY MRS. ALEXANDER FRASER,

Author of

"THE LAST DRAWING-ROOM," "A FATAL PASSION,"

"THE MATCH OF THE SEASON," "A FASHIONABLE MARRIAGE,"

"A PROFESSIONAL BEAUTY," etc., etc., etc.

“O! Daughters of dreams and of stories
That life is not wearied of yet!
Faustine! Fragoletta! Dolores!
Fèlise and Yolande, Juliette!”

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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DAUGHTERS OF BELGRAVIA.

CHAPTER I.

A LEADER OF SOCIETY.

"O Love! when Womanhood is in the flush,
And Man a pure unspotted thing,
His first breathed word, and her half-conscious blush,
Are fair as light in Heaven—or flowers in Spring!"

"LADY BERANGER
AT HOME.

A 1, Belgrave Square.—June 20th."

ALL the *élite* in London know these bits of pasteboard well, and all the *élite* like to avail themselves of Lady Beranger's invitation, for Lady Beranger's house is one of the swellest in town, and offers multifarious attractions.

Everything is *en règle* this fine June night, when myriads of stars keep high jubilee in the sky, and a round, yellow moon like a big blubber ball, promises to develop into yet greater brightness as the hours wear on.

The windows are ablaze from top to bottom of the Belgravian mansion. The floral decorations—banks of purple and white violets, straight from the glorious Riviera, are perfect and costly.

Achille, Lord Beranger's famous French *chef*, has surpassed himself in dainty concoctions. Gunter has sent in buckets of his world-renowned ice, and Covent Garden has been ransacked for choicest fruits.

One little aside before we go any further. All this magnificence and lavishness is "on tic." The Berangers, like a good many others of their class, are as poor as church mice; but "Society"—that English Juggernaut that crushes everything under its foot—demands that its votaries shall even ruin themselves to satisfy its claims—but *revenons à nos moutons*.

Everybody who is anybody is here. All the lords and the ladies, the honourables and dishonourables, the hangers on to aristocratic skirts, the *nouveau riche*, the pet parsons and actors, eligibles and detrimentals, and the black sheep, that go towards composing the "upper current." The spacious rooms teem with handsome thoroughbred men, and lovely well-*dressed*?—women. And yet "they come! they come," though the clocks are chiming midnight and Coote and Tinney's Band has been pouring out its softest strains for two hours.

The host and hostess are still on duty near the entrance, all ready to be photographed; so we'll just take them.

Lord Beranger is tall and thin. His hair is so fair that the silver threads thickly intersecting it are hardly visible. His eyes are blue—the very light blue that denotes either insincerity or imbecility—his smile is too bland to be genuine, his talk is measured to match his gait, and he lives the artificial life of so many of his brotherhood, to whom the opinion of "the world" is everything.

Lady Beranger is fair, fat and forty—and a hypocrite—as she awaits her tardy guests, so weary, that under the shelter of her long trailing blue velvet skirts and *point de gaze*, she indulges in the gallinacious tendency of standing first on one leg and then on the other—her expression is as sweet as if she delighted to be a martyr to these late votaries of fashion.

Only once she loses sight of worldliness, and permits the ghost of a frown to flit across her brow, as she whispers to her husband:

"Is Zai with Delaval? I don't see that Conway anywhere!"

Lord Beranger shrugs his shoulders and answers nothing. Achille's best efforts in *Salmis de Gibier*, *sauce Chasseur* and *Baba au Rhum*, are just ready, and he is evolving the momentous point of who he should take

in. He would not make an error in such an important thing as precedence for all the world! a regular society man is always a stickler for absurd little trifles like these. Does the handsome Duchess of Allchester rank higher than the elegant and younger Duchess of Eastminster? He turns up his light blue eyes and puckers his forehead in the vain hope of calling up to mind the date of the dukedoms, but it is futile; this salient fact has entirely slipped from his memory. So he goes in search of the patrician lady who finds most favour in his sight.

Lady Beranger, still in *statu quo*, turns towards a girl who has paused near, in the middle of a waltz.

"Gabrielle, can you tell me where Zai is?" she asks in icy tones. The tone and the gleam in her eyes betoken dislike, and the girl addressed pays her back with interest. There is quite a ring of malicious pleasure in her voice as she answers her stepmother.

"Zai wanted some supper after three dances with Carlton Conway, so he took her in to have some."

Lady Beranger flushes angrily, and vouchsafing no further notice of her "cross in life"—Gabrielle—walks away in her stately fashion, exchanging pleasant words or smiles as she goes, but throwing a hawk-like glance round the room all the time.

Chafing inwardly at her stepdaughter's answer, especially as it was made before Lord Delaval, she does a tour of the capacious *salon*, then dives through the crowd at the door of the supper room, and finally subsides on to a seat next to a fair-haired, blue-eyed, good-looking miniature of Lord Beranger.

"Baby, have you seen Zai?" she questions, low but sharply.

Baby Beranger looks up into her mother's face with wide-open innocent eyes. It would be hard to credit the owner of such eyes with deceit, or such pretty red lips with fibs. Baby has such a sweet little face, all milk and roses, surmounted by little hyacinthine golden curls like a cherub's or a cupid in a valentine, and her mouth is like an opening pomegranate bud, but no matter what her face expresses, she is born and bred in Belgravia, and is Belgravian to the backbone.

"Zai, mamma!" she says innocently, "she is waltzing with Lord Delaval I think."

It is a deliberate falsehood, but it comes quite glibly from the child-like lips, and Baby, though she is only seventeen, has almost forgotten to blush when she does wrong.

"*Gabrielle* is with Lord Delaval," Lady Beranger snaps crossly. "*She* is not one to let the grass grow under her feet if she has an object in view."

"What object has Gabrielle to gain, mamma?" As if Baby didn't know! As if she had not slipped in of a night, with bare, noiseless feet, and a white wrapper, making her look like a delicious little ghost, behind the screen in her sister's room, and heard Gabrielle tell Zai that she fully intends being Countess of Delaval in spite of Lady Beranger's circumventions! But though Baby is only seventeen she takes in her mother, who flashes *sotto voce*:

"What object has Gabrielle? Why to make the best match in town. I don't believe that girl would stickle at anything."

Gabrielle's propensities to go ahead in everything are not interesting to Baby, who has quite a multitude of *affaires du cœur* of her own, so she agrees with her mother by a mournful shake of her curly head, and is speedily engrossed with a young German *attaché*, who, deluded by the apparent wealth of the host, thinks the youngest Honble. Miss Beranger will be a prize worth gaining.

Once more Lady Beranger breaks in on the preliminaries of this Anglo-Prussian alliance.

"Where's Trixy?" she asks.

"Gone off to bed. She said she was ill, but I think she was angry because Carlton Conway forgot his dance."

"Why did he forget his dance with her?" Lady Beranger mutters sternly, with hydra-headed suspicion gnawing her mind.

"Why?" Baby is a little at fault. She is rather *distracte* after Count Von Niederwalluf's last sweet nothing, and she has not an answer ready, so she speaks the truth once in a way:

"I think Carlton Conway was out on the balcony with Zai, mamma."

"I wish you would not call him *Carlton* Conway. How often have I told you that it is very bad form for girls to speak familiarly of men," Lady Beranger rejoins in a harsh whisper, then she moves off, much to Baby's satisfaction.

"Miladi looks angry," Von Niederwalluf murmurs softly. "She does not frown because—*Ich liebe dich*?"

Baby has never been good at languages, or at anything, in fact, that her numerous governesses have toiled to cram into her pretty little head, but

"*Ich liebe dich!*"

She understands these three little words quite well. She has seen them in a little book called "Useful English and German Phrases for Tourists."

"*Nein*," she coos tenderly, "and if she was angry it would make no difference, for—*Ich liebe dich*—too—you know."

Meanwhile the moon has grown fuller and rounder and yellower, and is right prodigal of its beams—and no wonder—for its tender glances, satiated as they must be with mortal beauty, have seldom fallen on a fairer thing than this girl who, Belgravian born and bred, has braved that autocrat of her class, the convenances, and with a long dark cloak thrown over her snowy ball-dress, and a large hat hiding the glory of her hair, has stolen out amidst the fresh cool foliage of the square, to talk to her lover.

A fair young girl, with a pure soft face, that owns a magnificent pair of eyes, big and grey and black lashed, a little straight nose, and a mouth sweet to distraction. Her hat has fallen back, and her hair looks all afire with ruddy gleam as the bright moonlight touches it, and even through the long loose cloak the perfection of her tall, slender figure is visible.

The man she has elected her lord and king for evermore is a man to whom most women give a second glance.

Women like height and strength in man, and this one stands over six feet two, and has broad shoulders, and carries his brown, cropped head as haughtily as if he were a prince instead of a pauper, and what in social parlance is too awful—a detrimental.

He has large brown eyes (sleepy as a rule but quite capable of suddenly kindling into passion), set deeply under straight well defined brows, aquiline thin-cut features, firmly moulded lips, a slight moustache, and a sort of *debonnair* style that suits him admirably.

Altogether Carlton Conway, "*jeune amoureux*" at the Bagatelle Theatre, is very much worth looking at, and is just the sort a romantic girl falls down before in abject adoration.

"We must take our lives into our own hands, Zai," he says very passionately, marking how sweet his love looks under the soft moonbeams. "We must run away, my child!"

One arm is round her slim waist, her cheek, lovelier and whiter and purer than a white rose, is against his breast, her small snowflake of a hand lies restfully in his strong clasp.

Zaidie Beranger starts.

"Run away, Carl?" she asks in an awed voice. Such a frightful defiance of the conveniences has never been known in the annals of the Berangers, and it sounds quite too awful in her tiny pink ears. Possibly, or rather probably, she has passed hours, delightful fleeting hours, in her own little sanctum sanctorum in Belgrave Square, picturing the pretty wedding at St. George's or St. Peter's, with the organ pealing out "The voice that breathed o'er Eden," the bevy of aristocratic bridesmaids, with Gabrielle and Trixy and Baby among them, attired in cream satin and dainty lace, and overladen with baskets of Marshal Niel roses, the central and most attractive figures on the scene her Carl and herself.

It is heartrending to think of the demolition of her lovely picture.

"Run away, Zai," Carl Conway answers impetuously, for the moonbeams are falling full on her face, deepening the lustre of the sweet grey eyes, dancing and quivering on the wealth of fair hair and making her seem if possible doubly desirable in his eyes. "If they won't let us have our way quietly and comfortably, of course we must run away. Shall we let them part us for ever? Could you bear it, my Zai? Could you know that for the rest of our natural existence (and we may both live to a hundred) that we shall never see each other, speak to one another, kiss each other again, and live?"

She listens rapt, as she always listens to each word and tone of the beloved voice, and she fully realises the intense misery of the situation.

Never to speak to Carl, never to see Carl, never to kiss Carl again!

Her cheek grows whiter, her spirit sinks, her courage to do right dies an ignominious death; and a lump rises up in her throat, and then seems to fall back on her heart like a great cold stone.

"Well, Zai?" he cries, not understanding her silence. "Of course you think as I do, my darling! You know it would kill us to part. Oh, Zai, you cannot surely be hesitating, you cannot be thinking of letting aught come between us two! You *must* feel that death would be better than separation!"

"Yes!" she whispers, and now, under the moonbeams, he sees a lovely pink colour steal over her face, and the sweetest, tenderest lovelight fill her big grey eyes. "Death would be a thousand times better, I could not live without you, Carl! I suppose it would be very wrong for us to go away, but it would be impossible to stay!"

"Of course it would, my child," he says quietly, as if assured of the fact.

"If we could wait till I am twenty-one, Carl, perhaps——"

"No, no!" he interrupts imperiously. "Why, Zai, you can't know how I love you—how you are life of my life—or you would not *dare* to suggest such a thing. Two whole long, never-ending, wretched years of feverish anxiety and jealousy and longing. They would drive me clean mad! If you love me as I love you, you would not pause. You would have but one wish, one thought—one resolve in your heart—to bind yourself to me by a chain that no man could break, or woman either," he adds, thinking of Lady Beranger; "but you don't love me as I love you!"

The wish, the thought, the resolve are in her heart of hearts now. She looks up at his handsome face, meets the fervour in his brown eyes, and her pretty white arms, bare almost to the shoulder and with ropes of pearls glistening on them, steal round his neck, and her red lips plead wistfully.

"Not love you as you love me, Carl!" she says, with her sweet mouth twitching like a child's.

Venus Victrix—as is always the case.

If she had said she hated him, and yet looked as beautiful as she does, he would probably have adored her all the same, but now the clinging clasp, the loving grey eyes, the tremulous lips, and, above all, the abandon that love lends her, conquers completely, and the big strong man is the veriest baby, malleable as wax, in the circle of these dimpled arms and within earshot of the throb of his love's true heart.

"My own, my sweet!" he cries, stooping and kissing her from brow to chin. "I know you will come when I bid you, my Zai!"

"When you bid me, Carl," she says, her head against his shoulder, her eyes fixed on his face.

Silence for a minute or two. The fresh night air sweeps over them, the leaves rustle gently overhead, and they are as virtually alone as Adam and Eve in Eden. Suddenly the strains of a band fall faintly on the quiet square, and they both start from dreamland into reality.

She listens a moment.

"*Estudiantina!* It's the eighteenth dance, Carl," she says, nervously, for Zai has a much more wholesome fear of her august mother than her sisters have. "How long we have been absent!"

He glances at his watch.

"Half-past one o'clock!—nearly one hour and a-half. Who would believe it, little one? Nearly an hour and a half, that has flown like this because you and I are alone together. Just so our lives will pass like a delicious dream, my Zai. I don't think any two people in this world ever loved one another as we do. The very first time I saw you—do you remember? It was at Lady Derringham's. I have been devoted to fat, fussy Lady

Derringham ever since! I knew it was all over with me. No more flirtations, no more bachelor ways for me. I knew it was my wife standing before me, in a sweet little blue dress, with a bunch as big as herself of lilies of the valley in her bosom. Zai, did you feel any instinct of the kind?"

"Yes," she whispers, nestling into his arms and kissing his coat-sleeve surreptitiously.

The strains of the Estudiantina Waltz are still floating on the still air. The moon has hidden her face behind a bank of greyish cloud, and already the first pink tinge of dawn peeps down on earth.

"Tell me what you felt?" he says, forgetful of time, of the conveniences, of Lady Beranger's wrath, and clasping her nearer, he tenderly draws the long dark cloak closer round her slender throat.

"In the first moment I saw you, Carl, it seemed to me as if God had chosen me out for such delicious—delicious happiness as no other girl ever had in the world. I loved you in that moment as much as I love you now, Carl! And that is—oh! how can I tell you? I don't believe that *was* the beginning of my love, for it was so great, and full, and perfect, that it *must* have been growing a long, long time. I love you!—I love you! I could say it every hour of my life, until you tired of hearing me. But you will never, *never* tire of hearing me say it, Carl, will you?" she asks wistfully.

Carlton Conway laughs as he listens, but it is scarcely a laugh that denotes mirth. Eight-and-twenty—he has never found a true woman yet to his thinking, until this one came and sat down in blind adoration at his feet, and gave all her pure and loving heart and soul into his keeping—unreservedly—unquestioningly—and brought a sense of happiness with her which he had never pictured even in his dreams.

Tired of hearing that she loves him! When her love is the one thing in all the world to him. It is these words of hers that make him laugh. They seem so strange and absurd, when he knows that his whole being is full of her. So he answers her by wrapping his arms round her, and pressing fond, fervent kisses on her brow and lids and sweet tempting lips—the lips that are his, and that no other man has touched like this. He has culled their perfume and fragrance, and as he feels this to be true, each kiss that he gives and takes seems to be a link in the chain of love that binds them together.

"When do your people leave town, Zai?" he asks her, "and for how long?"

"The day after to-morrow, Carl," she answers, stifling back a sob, for Hampshire seems to be the world's end from London, "but we shall be back in a week."

"And who has Lady Beranger invited down to Sandilands?"

"Mr. Hamilton and Lord Delaval."

Carlton Conway grinds his heel into the ground with impotent rage.

"So," he mutters, "both are eligible men. How well Lady Beranger knows what she's about. I wonder for which of her lovely daughters she is trying to hook old Hamilton?"

"For Trixy I think, Trixy always gets on with elderly men. I believe she is really in love with someone, and is therefore indifferent if her companions are old or young."

Carl Conway reddens. Of course everybody knows that Trixy Beranger, who used to be the biggest flirt in town when she came out two years ago, has sobered down strangely, and everybody puts down the change to the influence of Carl Conway.

"And Delaval is asked for *you*," he cries jealously.

"Oh, Gabrielle will take care of *him*," Zai laughs brightly. "Gabrielle is more fitted for a coronet than either of us. She is so tall and stately, and has so much of what mamma calls worldly guile."

"Which, thank God, *you* haven't, my own Zai. I have got an invitation for the day after to-morrow to Elm Lodge."

"Ah!" she cries, with a happy smile, "that is only a mile from Sandilands."

"Yes, but you know Crystal Meredyth is rather fond of me, and Mrs. Meredyth doesn't object to followers, even if they are artists or actors."

Zai shivers from head to foot in the warm June night, and grows white to her quivering lips as she draws herself away gently from his clasp.

"What is it, darling?" he asks anxiously.

No answer.

Zai's head droops so that he cannot see her eyes, so he puts his hand under her chin and lifts up her face, and as he gazes down at it he thinks that God never made so beautiful a thing as she who has been made for him. The red lips quiver, her sweet eyes tell him such a wondrous tale of love, that he forgets everything but himself and her.

How he longs to carry her away in his stalwart arms. His darling, his little sweetheart!

"Come, Zai, my own, own Zai! Speak to me, tell me once more that you love me, that no one will ever make you forget me. It drives me wild to think that those fellows at Sandilands will be near you, and I away."

"You will have—Crystal Meredyth!" she whispers tremulously, then she breaks into a passion of tears, each of which stab him to the heart.

He kisses them off, and holds her to him fondly, and what with caresses and love words, draws the smiles back to her mouth, and the pink colour to her cheek.

"Zai, will you swear to be as true to me as I shall be true to you?"

"I swear," she replies unhesitatingly.

"And you won't let those fellows, Delaval and Hamilton, dare to make love to you?"

"I would rather *die*, Carl."

"I believe you would, my child," he answers in a trustful voice, "and now let us say good-night here, though I am going back to the house to show myself."

"Good-night!"

And, like Romeo and Juliet, they find parting is such sweet sorrow that it is some moments before it takes place.

And when Zai leaves him, he murmurs to himself, truthfully, honestly:

"My God, how I love her!"

Ten minutes afterwards, he is valseing to the strain of "Love's Dreamland" with Crystal Meredyth, and whispering low to her, and Crystal, who has set him up as a hero to worship, blushes and smiles with intense satisfaction.

"What a flirt that Conway is," Lady Beranger soliloquises, as she watches him covertly. "I do not believe he really presumes to think of Zai, but it won't do to have him interfering with Delaval. What a charming couple they make," she adds with intense satisfaction, as Zai floats by with Lord Delaval, but she does not mark how *distracte* her daughter looks, and that the good-looking peer's soft nothings fall on stoney ground, and neither does she know that when the ball is over, Zai goes to bed and cries bitterly as she remembers that Crystal Meredyth is lovely and that men always like pretty women.



CHAPTER II.

SANDILANDS.

"Man's love is of man's life a thing apart,
'Tis woman's whole existence."

It must be a rose-tinted existence. So outsiders fancy as they look at Sandilands from under the shadowy light and shade that falls across some mossy bank, but before they venture an opinion on the subject, let them pause. The judging of other folks' lives by their external surroundings is the most deceptive work possible.

Sandilands is a paradise, but, like the original Paradise, it has a serpent crawling over its flowers—nay, it has more than one.

"Going down to Sandilands just for a breath of fresh air, you know, after the stuffiness of Town," Lady Beranger imparts to the Dowager Marchioness of Damesbury.

But the Dowager knows better. She knows that Lady Beranger delights in the stuffiness of Town, especially in the season, and that Sandilands is only a decoy duck for Lord Delaval.

So she shakes her well-known curls solemnly at the fibber and says nothing, but thinks ever so much the more. She is an astute old aristocrat, old—Heaven knows *how* old—but as festive as a young thing of one score, and always to be found at country houses, as a sort of standing dish.

They do say—they who say everything—that she never spends any of her own income, but is kept in board and lodging by the friends whom she honours by feeding at their expense.

"We are only going down for a week, couldn't we persuade you, dear Marchioness, to run down with us?"

Yes. The Dowager accepts with pleasure. She is a bit of a wag. She has lived so long in the world that she has grown a little cynical and humorous over its fads and follies, and Lady Beranger amuses her immensely. It's such fun to think that Lady Beranger believes she takes her in, when all the while she reads Lady B. through and through, and knows that she is only asked down to Sandilands for mamma to talk to, while her daughters catch the eligibles.

The day after the Berangers come down to Sandilands is a day of days. A sort of day on which one feels satisfied with one's-self and with one's neighbours, and a day on which we forget all the bad days, simply because this one is so exceptionally beautiful.

A mite of a breeze swishes by, just to stir up the leaves overhead out of their laziness, and to make them grumble monotonously at being disturbed. The big brown bees greedily devour the faces of the fragrant roses, the morning is dressed up in pale crimson, the scent of flowers weighs down the babyish wings of the air, and a couple of pinkish, purplish clouds stand like motionless pillars of Heaven.

It feels to the most unromantic like a hasty snatch of golden splendour gone astray from Eden, an hour in which "Society" forgets its paltry ambitions and heart-burnings, and feels as if there is yet some balm in Gilead, and a life beyond Tophet, in which human hearts will have peace and rest.

Zai has slipped out through the long French casement that opens on the lawn. Gabrielle has contrived to get Lord Delaval into the music-room, where she feeds him with passionate French love-songs, in a low, rich contralto. Trixy, leaning back, fair and indolent, and a trifle indifferent, listens to Archibald Hamilton's prosy discourse on the Land Bill. Baby has meandered down the flowery paths with young Hargreaves, the good-looking village Vet, on pretence of showing him an ill-conditioned Persian cat, but in reality to amuse herself with him *faute de mieux*.

So Zai, once out of sight, flies swiftly through the shrubberies, and only pauses when the far end of the grounds is reached.

It is just from this particular spot that a glimpse of Elm Lodge can be had.

She leans languidly against an old oak, with the grass, which is yet virgin from the Sun-god's kisses, making a dainty green carpet for her little feet.

Poor little Zai! A daughter of Belgravia is a traitor to her creed, for she is honestly, desperately in love.

If Carl Conway could see her at this moment, men are such slaves to beauty that he would be doubly enamoured of his little sweetheart. The background of dark green glossy foliage throws up almost too vividly her lovely white flesh tints and her slender statuesque figure. Her hands are folded loosely together, and a far-off expression lurks in her big, luminous grey eyes, half veiled by broad, drooping lids and long, curling

lashes.

Zai is dreaming—"only dreaming."

Her dreams are:

"Dim and faint as the mists that break
At sunrise from a mountain lake,"

but they are evidently pleasant, for a soft smile passes over her lips, and her face seems to overflow with sunshine, while all manner of entrancing dimples spring into life, and make a "*parfait amour*" of her as our neighbours across the Channel say.

Perhaps an acute physiognomist would find something wanting in the fair sweet, girlish face, a power, a firmness, character, in fact, but few of us are true physiognomists, even if acute ones, and very few eyes, especially masculine ones, would discover flaws in the entrancing beauty that has caught Carl Conway's worldly heart.

There is a wistful look in Zai's face however, which does not deteriorate from her attractions. It has come with the thought that just there over the clump of swaying pines, is the house where Crystal Meredyth lives, and where Carl is staying.

"Zai!"

Zai has been a fixture against the oak tree for an hour, and so absorbed in her thoughts that the far-off expression lingers in her glance as she turns slowly round.

"Yes, Gabrielle."

"Your mother wants you. Her ladyship's keen instinct divined that in all probability you were mooning away your time out here."

"Mooning, Gabrielle, what a word."

"A very good word, and an expressive one. All Belgravia speaks slang now; it has become quite fashionable to imitate the coal-heavers and the horsey men, and I don't dislike it myself. It is far better than the refined monotonous twaddle of those horrible convenances."

"Do you talk slang to Lord Delaval?" Zai asks with a smile.

"*Pas si bête!* I leave that till I have landed my fish!"

"I often wonder, Gabrielle, if you really care for that man, or if you are only trying to catch him."

"Both, dear. The first feeling naturally induces the last inclination. But we can't stay chattering here; lunch is ready and the stepmother wants you."

"What for?" asks Zai, with unusual petulance.

She does not want to leave this charmed spot, with the big trees arching overhead, the swallows foolishly whirling round and round up in the sky, the sunlight falling on hollow and glade and dell, and just over there the house where her Carl dwells.

"How should I know? Lady Beranger is not likely to confide her desires to such a heretic as myself; perhaps she does not think it quite the thing for the flower of her flock to stand like a marble effigy of love and patience for the under-gardener to gape at."

"As if I care *who* stares at me!" Zai mutters with unwonted recklessness.

"Of course you don't, *pas le moins du monde!* Zaidie Beranger, a modern Galatea, that only her Pygmalion, Carl Conway, can rouse into feeling or life, must naturally be as impervious as the Sphinx to curiosity," Gabrielle says mockingly, with an expressive shrug of her shoulders that, together with a slight accent, denote that she has only a part claim to English nationality.

"Don't chaff, Gabrielle, it is most unlady-like," Zai says, imitating Lady Beranger's slow solemn voice, and both burst out laughing.

"But really I only came out for a whiff of fresh air; the house oppresses me. But there never is a bit of freedom at home, my mother never leaves me alone."

"Perhaps she has right on her side, just now. You are tanning your skin in this broiling sun, and looking ill from the heat."

"What *can* it signify *how* I look?" Zai cries contemptuously.

"Only that Lord Delaval was deploring this morning how white and thin you were looking. He even hinted that you had gone off a little, although you have had only one season in London."

"Lord Delaval! Gabrielle. Pray, what right has he to indulge in personal remarks about me, and how much can *his* opinion affect me, do you think?"

Gabrielle colours angrily.

"As for that, Lord Delaval is not isolated in the place he holds in your estimation. What is anybody's opinion to you, you silly love-sick child, except one individual, and he is what Lady Beranger calls, a 'detrimental,' and the object of her unmitigated dislike."

"If you have only come out to vex me, Gabrielle, I think you had much better have stayed indoors and entertained Lord Delaval with more of those songs. Mamma calls them positively indecent; she says they are simply a 'declaration' under cover of music, and that thoroughbred girls should be ashamed to sing them."

"I heard you singing to Lord Delaval this morning, Gabrielle,

'Ah! je t'adore mon âme:
Ah! je te donne—tout! tout!
Et toi?—veux tu etre infame
Ah! veux tu me rendre—fou?'

and, you *must* say, it sounds like a declaration!"

A deep crimson wave sweeps over the stormy face of Gabrielle Beranger, making her look like a beautiful

fiend. A frown gathers unmistakably on her forehead, and the large but well-formed hand, that holds her parasol, clutches the handle like a vice, with a passion that the owner does not care to conceal.

"So Lady Beranger said that? How dare she hit at my mother's birth as she is always doing. I am sure it does not show her to have any of the delicate feelings which aristocrats are supposed to monopolise! And after all, she only took my mother's leavings."

"How ridiculously sensitive you are on the point of your maternal history, Gabrielle. I wish I could make you forget all about it, that you might not remind one of it so often," Zai says wearily.

For Gabrielle Beranger, like many of us, has a decided cross. And that cross is the social status of the French *bouquetière* that Lord Beranger had elevated to his bosom and position in the days of his hot-headed, unwary youth. No one would believe such a peccadillo of him now—starch as his own stick-ups; full of proprieties, and a slave to the voice of the world.

Her dead mother's birth is the skeleton in Gabrielle's cupboard that is dragged out for her own and her step-sisters' benefit continually, and yet, this same sensitiveness is curiously inconsistent with her self-complacency and undeniable pretension.

"Yes, Gabrielle, you are absurdly sensitive on some things. I can't think why, since we are all Lord Beranger's daughters," Zai murmurs carelessly, pulling off absently the leaves from a little bough of willow, and wondering what Carl and Crystal are amusing themselves with. Perhaps, ah! the thought makes her feel quite sick! Crystal Meredyth is regaling Carl on the same sort of passionate music as Gabrielle has favoured Lord Delaval with.

"Yes; we are all Lord Beranger's daughters; but you all have the *sangre azul* running through your veins, while I have the muddy current of the Quartier Latin to boast of; and then again, all the money in the place, little as it is, came with my step-mother, and Papa and I are dependents on her bounty."

Zai does not answer, the subject is threadbare, and silence is so pleasant with the mighty elms sending long shadows across the emerald grass, with the foliage rustling gently, and fleecy white clouds scudding along the sapphire sky, tempering the amber heat.

The muddy current that Gabrielle hates is not the only misfortune Lord Beranger's early imprudence has brought her. He had married a second time, and the three girls, Beatrice, Zaidie and Mirabelle were no longer in actual babyhood when Gabrielle was brought from the French people who had charge of her to Belgravia—brought with all the faults and failings of bourgeoisie, faults and failings that to Lady Beranger's notions are too dreadful.

"It is far easier to eradicate bad temper, or want of principle, than to put *savoir faire*, or a due sense of the convenances, into a girl," she always says, but all the same she has tried to do her duty by this step-daughter of hers, in her cold steely way, and is quite convinced that she has been the means of snatching the brand from the burning, and saving a soul from perdition.

As Gabrielle and Zai stand side by side, quite a family resemblance can be traced between them. But it is only a general resemblance after all; for they are really as dissimilar as light and darkness.

Gabrielle has none of Zai's angelic type. A celebrated French author once said that womankind are divided into three classes—Angels, Imbeciles, Devils.

Zai is an angel. Gabrielle is certainly not an imbecile, therefore she must be in the last class.

Both the sisters are tall, and both are slender, and both bear upon them an unmistakably aristocratic air, though Gabrielle's claims to it are only partial. She inherits the creamy skin, the coal black heavy tresses, and the bold passionate eyes of her French mother, and in spite of her ripe and glowing tints of opal and rose, and her full pouting lips, she is cast in a much harder mould than Zai or the other sisters.

Gabrielle is in fact too hard and self-reliant for a woman, whose very helplessness is her chief charm, and in whom the clinging confiding nature that yearns for sympathy and support appeals to the masculine heart as most graceful and touching of all things, for timidity is the most taking attribute of the fair sex, though it has its attendant sufferings and inconveniences.

The self-assertion, and freedom, and independence that there is so much chatter about amongst our women now-a-days is only a myth after all, for a real refined womanly nature closes like the leaf of the sensitive plant at unaccustomed contact with the world.

But there are women, and *women*, and men who fancy each sort according to good or bad taste. There is none of the sensitive plant about Gabrielle Beranger anyway. She is of a really independent nature that will assert itself *per fas et ne fas*—a nature that can brook no control, and that throws off all conventional shackles with barely concealed contempt. She is a Bohemian all over, she has belonged to the Bedouins of civilisation from her youth up, and has run rampant through a labyrinth of low life, and the tastes that go hand in hand with it, but on the principle that all things are good for something, Gabrielle's hardness and self-reliance, united to acuteness, have served her during her career when a nobler but weaker nature might have sunk beyond redemption.

Her early years have unfitted her for the Belgravian life that fate has chalked out, and a treadmill of social duties proves so tiresome that no paraphernalia of luxury—dearly as she loves it—reconciles her to her lot. At least it did not do so until she fell head over ears in love with the fair, languid, and brilliant peer—the Earl of Delaval.

Her wilful, fiery spirit revolts at being a sort of pariah to her stepmother and her stepmother's swell relatives, the swells whom (until she knew Lord Delaval) her revolutionary spirit despised utterly. She would give worlds if the man she loves was a Bohemian like herself, and whatever is true in her is comprised in her feelings for him.

She is an enigma to her sisters, whose promising education has to a certain extent reduced ideas and feelings within the radius of "propriety," and taught them, at any rate, the eleventh Commandment—that all Belgravia knows,

"Thou shalt not be found out."

"Can anything—anything make you really happy, Gabrielle?" Trixy had asked one day, years ago, when

she and her two sisters had enjoyed, to their heart's content, a big box at Drury Lane, and a pantomime with a transformation scene that had worked up their young minds into a fever of excitement, and Gabrielle had sat through it all without a change on her dark face.

"Happy," she had said, "can anything give *real* happiness? Of happiness in a positive state I knew nothing, my dear properly-brought-up young sister. I am only able to make my comparison by a greater or lesser feeling of misery. I dare say I often shock you by my sentiments, but anyone who has been kicked about like a football in this world, as I have, is not likely to look at things in the same light as you Belgravian girls. I believe you all regard with suspicion the poor wight for whom life hasn't been all *couleur de rose*, and think it a shocking instance of depravity of human nature if one should not be intensely content in such a remarkably pleasant world."

"Where have you learned such a queer way of thinking, Gabrielle?" Zai and Baby demanded in a breath.

"Where, indeed?" Gabrielle was not going to say. *Pas si bête!* She averts her head and holds her peace, and is quite sharp enough to know that to the little, pink, unsullied ears, it would not do to whisper the secrets of the past, when, almost a gutter *gamin*, she had picked up notions of life and its thousand joys and ten thousand miseries. A little red and white *pierrotte's* garb, in the rollicking mad Carnival time—a gaudy tinselled box of cheap and nasty bon-bons—a fragment of flimsy, soiled, but flaring ribbon—or a battered artificial flower to deck her coal-black plaits. These pretty well had been her catalogue of joys, but the miseries were just countless in the bare and squalid room *au cinquième* among the roofs and the sparrows—a mother always meretricious in her youth and beauty, but absolutely awful with faded cheeks and haggard eyes, dying the death of a daughter of Heth—without one prayer on her pallid mouth—without one hope in her reckless breast. Then—the woeful absence of bread, the continual presence of drink.

For can there be a spectacle more sickening than a drunken woman—dead for the nonce to shame and disgrace; the idiotic glare in the eye, the foolish simper on the grinning lips, the flow of words that pour unchecked from a debased mind?

When Gabrielle's memory conjures up all this she closes her black eyes tightly to try and shut out the horrible past, and yet she loves her Bohemia still, and hates Belgravia, save the one particular spot in it where Lord Delaval lives and moves, and has his being.

She is thinking of him now under the arching elms. Athwart their fluttering leaves she can see his blond aristocratic face, and she longs to be back to hear his voice, the languid accents of which are harmony to her ears.

"Shall I go in now and say you prefer dreaming away the hours here to *cotelettes soubise* and cold chicken?" she asks, breaking in rather sharply on the long silence which has fallen, and during which she sees plainly enough that poor little love-sick Zai has entirely forgotten her proximity even. She is wonderfully practical is Gabrielle Beranger, a child of the south, for her maternal ancestors were pure Marseillaise. She is brimful of passion, but the passion is sufficiently material to permit of love of Lord Delaval and love of the flesh pots to go hand-in-hand, and it occurs to her at this moment, in the midst of her reverie under the elms, that the *cotelettes soubise* and *Cailles à point d'asperges* do not improve by growing cold.

"I am not day-dreaming, Gabrielle. Cannot one be allowed to think, even, without being called to account for it?" Zai asks wearily.

"Not when the thoughts are, to say the least, very foolish ones. When the subject of them is one Carlton Conway, *jeune amoureux* at the Bagatelle, and very much the reverse of one of Lady Beranger's pet eligibles."

A swift colour like a deep rose pink sweeps over Zai's face, a colour that creeps up to the roots of her ruddy chestnut hair, and dyes her fair lily-like throat. The name Gabrielle whispers has a magical charm about it, for besides the blush, it evokes the softest of love-lights into Zai's grey eyes.

"I will go in with you if you like," she says in a voice that sounds quite meek and deprecatory, and Gabrielle, as she glances at her, feels sorry that her careless words should hurt this loving, tender heart. If there is a soft spot in her heart for one of her own sex it is for this step-sister of hers. Trixy she hates, and Baby she despises, but Zai, although like the others, born and bred in Belgravia, is of quite another mould. But though Gabrielle is fond of Zai, she will not hesitate to plunge the dagger (metaphorically) into her heart if the time should come when such would serve her own purposes.

"I didn't mean to chaff or worry just now, Zai," she says quite softly, with a humility that is quite foreign to her, "but you know you wear your heart so much on your sleeve, child, that no wonder daws will peck."

Zai's lids droop, and her lips twitch as if fully aware of her shortcomings. She is desperately in love, and has a simple nature in spite of Belgravia's training, and she is much too loyal to dream of denying the existence of a love that is part and parcel of her nature. Her passion for Carl Conway is like the air of Heaven to her, invisible, intangible, but yet it encircles her soul, and is just the Alpha and Omega of everything.

"You see, Zai, the governor and her ladyship want a pull up and not a drag down—the family finances are so seedy that they want rich men for sons-in-law. Even a German prince wouldn't find favour in their sight. They mean Trixy and you to marry Lord Delaval and Archibald Hamilton; they don't care in the least which marries which, so long as both good *partis* are secured. Baby will follow suit, directly you are both safely settled down with your money-bags. She is of that infantile sort that Shortland is supposed to have a fancy for, so probably the parents will go in for strawberry leaves for their youngest born. Zai, don't you pity any man who marries Baby? She is the greatest little caution in life."

"And what are they going to do with *you*, Gabrielle?" Zai asks, ignoring the hits at Baby.

"With *me*, oh, nothing. Nought can always take care of itself, for it never comes to harm, you know," Gabrielle answers bitterly, "but *you* are the one object of solicitude to Lady Beranger just now. Of course, with all her ambitious ideas, it does seem hard for you to subside into the wife of an actor, who has nothing to recommend him except a good-looking face, and a pleasant way of making love—a *rôle* he goes through nearly every day of his life, so that practice has made it perfect."

"His chief recommendation is—*himself!*" Zai whispers with quivering lips, and another hot and fleeting blush.

"Well, yes. *Je ne dis pas autrement!* I haven't a word to say against him. He is always nice to my face, though I don't believe he likes me in his heart. You see I am not of your sort, Zai."

Zai smiles softly at this, and then, with a woman's way of harping on love subjects when in love herself, says suddenly:

"I wonder if Baby will marry Lord Delaval one of these days?"

"Lord Delaval!" echoes Gabrielle, with a start and a frown. "And why on earth should she marry him?"

"Because he has been fond of Baby as long as I can remember. When we were all children together, he used to fight her battles, and Baby at five was the most quarrelsome little monkey that you can imagine. She does not care for him now, but used to love sitting on his knee, and patting his cheeks, and *on revient toujours*, you know."

"No! I *don't* know," Gabrielle answers with acerbity.

Her big black eyes dilate as she takes in each unwelcome word and her full red lip curls scornfully.

"I *do* hate stupid little reminiscences of childhood, Zai.

'I remember! I remember! when my little lovers came!
With a lily or a cherry, or a new invented game!'

Did you ever hear such inane trash as this sort of thing, Zai! Are you a simpleton or are you trying to throw dust in my eyes? We know each other too well for that. Let us speak truth always. I like truth under all circumstances, even if the hearing of it crushes my heart and spoils my life; but of course let those live on lies who like them!"

And she laughs, a harsh unpleasant laugh, that Balzac and Georges Sand have taught her, and to which is coupled a natural capability of catching at the under currents of life.

"I never was a hypocrite, Gabrielle and I hate falsehoods as much as you do," Zai answers rather hotly.

"Then why do you pretend that it's Baby and not you that will become Lady Delaval by-and-by, perhaps."

Zai faces her with a bright flush on her cheek, and a flash in her soft grey eyes.

"I Lady Delaval! Gabrielle, you must be mad to hint such a thing. Am I a child or a doll to be handed over to a man I would rather die than marry—if he were one of the Royalties and three times better looking than he is! Lord Delaval is an insipid dandy, with a weak face and—and just the opposite of what I admire!"

"Insipid, weak! Your ideas of him are just prejudice, Zai. You have heard your oracle run him down, and have taken in everything as if it was gospel. I am a bit of a physiognomist and I dare be sworn Lord Delaval never made up his mind to arrive at anything or anybody and failed!"

"He will fail ignominiously if he ever does me the honour of thinking of me as Lady Delaval! Gabrielle you *know* I shall never marry any one if I don't marry Carl!"

Gabrielle shrugs her grand shoulders again, while a shade of contempt passes over her mouth as she looks at her companion. Zai looks so fragile and weak—so unfit for any contest of life, a piece of rustic waxwork, in fact, to be carefully handled. She grows quite white as she glances, thinking how easily Lady Beranger will arrange the match if Lord Delaval is willing—Lord Delaval, whom she loves so desperately that she would rather shoot him dead on the spot than let any other woman call him husband.

Insipid! Weak! the words rail her as they recur to her mind, since it is Lord Delaval's very force of character that is his greatest charm in her eyes, for she is of a nature to adore daring, even if unscrupulous and exercised in dishonourable cause. It is Delaval's intense masculinity that has fascinated her, for before she came in contact with him, she had never met a man of an equal amount of vigour, combined with so much personal beauty.—Gabrielle Beranger is one of those girls that Mephistopheles calls of super-sensuous refinement. And weakness of character has something repulsive in it for her.

Her senses are too susceptible, and she has a habit of filtering her emotions through the medium of an imagination which is rather dangerously material.

"I hope you'll prove yourself a paragon of strength, Zai," she says, with a mocking smile. "Lord Delaval, to my idea, has such an absolute will that I sometimes think he has taken for himself the motto of Philip of Spain, 'Time and I against any two.' If I were you, child, I should take him and bowl Carl Conway over. There isn't much of the right stuff in your beloved Carl, but in Lord Delaval there are possibilities of something far beyond the ordinary. Do you know, I think he and Randolph Churchill are much of a muchness, and you must acknowledge Lord Randolph is delicious; there's a go about him which I love, and which makes up for his being a Conservative."

"Gabrielle, if you admire Lord Delaval so much, why don't you try and marry him yourself?" Zai asks suddenly.

Gabrielle blushes, blushes a fierce, unmistakable red; she does not often blush, for this is a habit less known in Bohemia than Belgravia even, but the blush after all is only the tell-tale of the storm of feeling within, and her voice is hard as stone as she answers:

"I! you forget I am Gabrielle Beranger, with a lot of muddy current in my veins, and only my face as my fortune. Lord Delaval probably regards me as a nought in creation, a social mistake; handsome and fastidious, he can look for a wife among the Royalties, if he likes."

"Anyway, you *must* confess you are awfully in love with him, Gabrielle," Zai cries, with a mischievous laugh, and once more Gabrielle colours like a rose.

"Silly child! I know my position too well for that."

"I cannot understand why you should think so much of his standing—he is no better, socially, than all the other lords about town, and I cannot see why he should not marry a girl with whom he is always talking and flirting."

"Flirting! Of course you think he flirts with me! You cannot believe that any man holds me in sufficient respect to treat me as he would you or any other girl of his own set. I should like to know if no one can really like me and not try to amuse idle hours by flirting with me, but I suppose that is too much to expect! I *must*

be flirting material or nothing!"

Another silence falls on them after this outburst, then Gabrielle looks round and yawns.

"How I hate the country," she avers, "it is full of dismal sounds; the cattle do nothing but moan, the sheep wail, ah! ah! ah! and nature is one unceasing coronach. I wonder how many days it is Lady Beranger's will that we shall dabble in puddles, and look down empty roads. Do come along, Zai, your respected parent will kill me by the lightning of her eye if I go in without you. Just throw C. C. to the four winds, and come and make yourself agreeable to the menkind indoors."

"I'll come in five minutes, Gabrielle," Zai answers absently, and as soon as Gabrielle's tall figure is out of sight, she forgets her promise in a delicious little reverie, in which the sunlight, glinting down through the tangled boughs, touches her cheek with the deepest pink and adds a softer lustre to her sweet grey eyes.

"I will never marry any one but you Carl, so long as I live," she says half aloud fervently, then she glances furtively around, and when she finds she is all alone with the sunshine, the swaying leaves, the emerald grass, the foolish child devours with passionate kisses a tiny gold ring, which, after the fashion of romantic school-girls, is attached by a thin cord that encircles her pretty white throat, and rests night and day on the loving, fluttering heart that the same C. C., actor, pauper and detrimental, has taken possession of, wholly and solely.



CHAPTER III.

AFTERNOON TEA.

"All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players."

REVERIES cannot last for ever, even with Carl Conway's handsome face present in them, and Zai starts to find that the sun-god is making rapid tracks westward, and remembers that Sandilands is one of those clockwork houses where unpunctuality at meals is a cardinal sin.

It is hard; for Zai, like a good many other girls who are in love, has no appetite. She fed to repletion on soft words and softer caresses in Belgrave Square, the night of the ball. And she wants nothing now until—until—some more of the same kind of nectar is given her.

She walks slowly down a narrow path fringed on either side thickly by glossy shrubs, and which leads to the back of the house, and indifferent to the regard and gossip of high life below stairs, runs up to her own room.

The sun has climbed up quite high in the western sky, and, enthroned in golden raiment, pours down such a reflection of his yellow glory on the toilette table, that she stands for a moment blinking and winking her pretty eyes like a newborn puppy.

Then she suddenly recollects something Gabrielle had told her, and stooping, stares hard at herself in her mirror.

She dreads to find that she has really grown white and thin, that she has "gone off" according to Lord Delaval's verdict. The thought that Carl, who is so fastidious in his ideal of beauty, may find her wanting is too awful; so she falls to examining feature by feature eagerly.

These are what the looking-glass reflects back.

A small head, crowned with waves of hair, chestnut and silky, with threads of ruddy gold gleaming up here and there. A pair of big grey eyes, that can flash sharp lights in anger, but are as sweet and serene as a summer heaven when her soul is in sunshine. A pair of lips, red and tempting, cheeks, fair and lily white, with the faintest of pink rose petals laid on them, long, dark brown fringes to broad lids, whose shadow by and by may help to intensify a look of trouble in the eyes; but now all is morning in this charming face of nineteen.

Zai looks, but is not satisfied with the catalogue of charms presented to her critical gaze. Compared with the delicate perfection of Crystal Meredyth's face, with its well-opened china blue eyes and coral pouting mouth, she feels her own to be a decided failure. Her nose is not a bit Grecian, her expression has not the ladylike inanimate look of Crystal's.

She muses on, while she tidies her rebellious tresses that Zephyr has been taking liberties with, and fastens a bunch of dark-red glowing roses into the bodice of her white dress, and makes herself what Lady Beranger calls "presentable" before society. And, as she muses, a sparkling smile breaks on her mouth, for no reason whatever, except that she feels happy since she loves Carl, and Carl loves her, and with the sparkle of this smile still lingering on her face she goes slowly down the grand staircase to find the luncheon-room deserted.

With a look of dismay at the huge Louis Seize timepiece opposite, the hand of which points at half-past four, she crosses a large square, tessellated hall, that opens into a boudoir that is a perfect gem in its way, and replete with all the luxury that "ye aristocrats" love.

The room is of an octagonal shape, with rare silken hangings of *bleu de ciel*; the walls, of ivory and gold, are decorated by Horace Vernet's delicious productions, varied by a pastel or two of Boucher's, and with a tiny but exquisite Meissonier, which even a neophyte in painting would pick out, gleaming from the rest.

Art is everywhere, but art united with indulgence and indolence. The lounges and ottomans are deep and puffy, and marvellously soft, and fat downy cushions lie about in charming confusion.

So much for the room, which cannot be seen without at once suggesting the presence of an ultra-refined

spirit.

This spirit, embodied in a good deal of flesh and blood and known as Lady Beranger, is here, presiding at afternoon tea.

Folds of rich black satin fall around her ample form, yards of priceless Chantilly go round her skirts and throat and wrists.

Satins and laces are her familiars, though the Beranger exchequer is low, for Worth and Elise, Lewis and Allenby, Marshall and Snelgrove supply them, and never worry for their bills.

Leaders of Society like Lady Beranger are walking advertisements of the goods, and it is so easy to make your plain Mrs. Brown, Jones or Robinson pay up any bad debts among the "quality."

Lady Beranger becomes her costly garments as well as they become her. She is a very tall woman, and very stately and handsome. Perhaps in the very palmiest days her beauty had never been classical. How seldom beauty is so! but she is very imposing to look on, and she is exceptionally thoroughbred in appearance. A woman in fact who bears upon her the unmistakable *cachet* of blue blood.

She has of course faults, and the gravest of them is love of money. It is the dream of her life that her lovely bouquet of daughters shall marry "fortunes," and her cross at present consists in the bitter knowledge that both Trixy and Zai are in love, and in love with a pauper.

A pauper, for Trixy is, in her way—a very different way to her sisters'—as much in love with Carl Conway as Zai is.

Afternoon tea is quite an institution at Sandilands, and at half-past four Lady Beranger settles down to a substantial meal of cake and muffins and bread and butter, while the olive branches look on in silent wonderment, and ask themselves if a love of the fleshpots comes hand in hand with riper years.

"Trixy, I forgot to tell you that I met old Stubbs near the Lodge gates, and he is coming to call this afternoon," Gabrielle announces, between slow sips of her tea.

"Is he! well he won't find *me* at home," a thin and peevish voice answers.

It seems to rise from the depths of one of the most comfortable chairs, on which an amber-haired white witch lies half *perdu*.

This is Trixy Beranger, Lady Beranger's eldest marketable article, and a lovely thing it is.

She would serve for an exact model, as she lounges here, of the lovely Persian girl that our Poet Laureate saw in his excursion up the Tigris to "Bagdad's shrines of fretted gold."

Trixy is a rare and radiant maiden—a bird of Paradise, over whom most men go mad, but do not care to wed, and to whom most women are cold, conscious that their good looks pale beside hers.

Gabrielle's glowing beauty of coal-black tresses and creamy skin, waxes quite dim in Trixy's proximity, and Baby's cherub face and golden curls are nowhere, but Zai—well, Zai is a law unto herself.

Society last year had fallen down helplessly on its knees, and worshipped the *débutante* of the season, the Hon. Beatrix Beranger. From the Royalties downwards she was the rage.

They even likened her to every poetical saint in the calendar, and Trixy, not over-weighted with brains, and with her lovely head completely turned, in acknowledgment of the compliment, considers herself in duty bound towards mankind in general, and in fact a point of conscience, to "pose" accordingly.

She feels it incumbent on her never to allow herself to be out of drawing, as the R. A.'s have it, to be always (in spite of the discomfort of the thing) ready for an inspiration for a poet, or a study for a painter; so from sheer force of habit, that has become her second nature, she sinks perpetually into graceful attitudes, even if no one more important than Baby's dachshund Bismark is by to admire.

She even arranges herself with due regard for the picturesque, when she retires to her own little sanctum for a siesta.

If Trixy's beauty is in consequence marred just a little bit in the world by a *souçon* of self-consciousness, it is not a matter of marvel. A Belgravian damsel can scarcely, with all the *bonne volonté* imaginable, personate Lalla Rookh, Idalian Aphrodite, Mary Anderson, the three Graces, a whole sisterhood of Muses, and herself to boot, without some one suffering in the transmogrification, and that some one is naturally—herself.

Just now Trixy, who has been reading an article on the Porte and Bulgaria, is "doing" an odalisque, out of a Turkish harem. She is surrounded by a pile of satin cushions with a tender background of pale lilac and gold embroidery that helps to enhance the wonderful transparency of her skin, displays to greater advantage the yellow wealth of her hair, and forms an effective relief for the little Greek profile, chiselled like a cameo.

Looking at her, it does not require much fertility of imagination to fancy her a Lurley, but Trixy Beranger it must be confessed is a Lurley more powerful to ensnare when silent than when she discourses. Such a stream of small talk, of silly frivolities, that pour from her perfect lips! The Mikado, tailor-made dresses, Mrs. Langtry's American outfit, these are about the only topics on her brain, and she babbles about them in a sort of childish treble that soon brings on a reaction in the breasts of her most devoted.

But though three parts of London have paid her attention, though dukes and earls have swelled the length of her train, long as a comet's tail, Trixy has never had one eligible offer.

So now, after the season's campaigning, and, superseded this last year by Zai, she is slightly disgusted at the non-appreciative qualities of the Upper Ten, though in no wise disenchanted with herself.

"May I enquire of whom you were speaking, Gabrielle?" Lady Beranger asks in a sepulchral tone, fanning herself with a huge Japanese screen, after her exertions with the cake, muffins, and bread and butter.

"Of old Stubbs! Of course he expects to find Trixy when he calls."

"But I shan't be!" Trixy reiterates decidedly. "I am going to Southampton to do some shopping. I am so comfortable I don't want to move, but Gabrielle you might ring and order the carriage for me."

Gabrielle laughs, and going over to her whispers:

"Old Stubbs was clad in a yellow-brown alpaca suit, and looked such a guy. He put me in mind of the frog that would a wooing go. I wonder what was the end of that frog."

"About the same as old Stubbs' will be, if he makes a fool of himself about me," Trixy answers peevishly,

while she settles herself in another picturesque attitude. "Still, whatever I choose to think of him, it is very unpleasant to have all one's admirers run down, as you have a shocking habit of doing, Gabrielle."

Gabrielle hearkens with a contemptuous smile, but she reddens hotly as Lady Beranger chimes in with:

"Of all things, flippancy is the most unlady-like. Gabrielle, *your* flippancy jars on my nerves horribly, to say nothing of its being indicative of low birth and breeding. Old Stubbs, whom you are pleased to make a butt of, is one of our biggest millionaires, and a most eligible acquaintance."

"Old Stubbs' father was a butcher," Gabrielle breaks in defiantly.

"Mr. Stubbs is a self-made man," Lady Beranger says quietly, casting a scornful glance at her stepdaughter. "I admire self-made men immensely, and I hope Trixy knows better than to be guilty of such rudeness as going out."

A frown puckers the odalisque's fair brow.

"I *prefer* going out shopping, mamma, to staying at home to talk to such an ugly man," she says wilfully.

"Fiddlesticks! Trixy. Recollect he is Hymen's ambassador, that he is wrapped up in bank notes, and that beauty's only skin deep," Gabrielle tells her, with a laugh.

"If you think Mr. Stubbs so charming, mamma, you know you can have his society all to yourself."

"I shall certainly make a point of being present," Lady Beranger answers, without a ruffle on her tutored face. "You ought to know me well enough, Trixy, to be aware that I should never risk such a breach of the *convenances* as to allow a daughter of mine to receive, alone, any man, were he king or kaiser, who was not her acknowledged suitor."

"Who is not an acknowledged suitor?" cries Baby, bouncing into the room after her usual fashion. Her hat has fallen off to the back of her head, her eyes dance with mischief, and her cheeks are flushed like damask roses, but her muslin dress is tossed and tumbled, and not improved by the muddy paws of a miserable half-bred Persian kitten which she holds in her arms.

"Hargreaves is such fun, Gabrielle! He came to look at Toots' tootsey-wootseys, and made love to me instead," she whispers.

"What a tomboy you are, Baby," Lady Beranger says sharply. "Lord Delaval will be in to tea presently, so run off and change your dress. You look like a maid-of-all-work, with your fringe all uncurled and your soiled hands, and *don't* bring that horrid kitten here again."

"I *hate* Lord Delaval!" Baby cries frankly. "He is not half so handsome or so nice as—as—shoals of men I know."

"Not so nice as Hargreaves, the village veterinary," Gabrielle breaks in maliciously, vexed at her idol being run down.

"Hargreaves! What can Baby know of *his* niceness?" Lady Beranger questions, in her severest tone.

"Nothing mamma; it is only Gabrielle's spite because she thinks Lord Delaval such a paragon!"

Lady Beranger passes her eye over Gabrielle, icily.

"I do not think it is of importance to us what you think of Lord Delaval, Gabrielle, so long as your sentiments in no way clash with mine on the subject. Did you ask Zai to come in?"

"I am here, mamma, do you want me?" Zai says, walking quietly into the bosom of her family, and thinking what a very uncomfortable place it is.

The balmy breeze stirring the elm tops has not wooed her in vain—for her cheeks look like blush roses and her hair seems to have caught in its meshes every glint of sunlight that fell on it.

"Yes, I want you, or rather I don't want you to take up your residence completely in the grounds, to ruin your skin, and to catch those vulgar things, freckles; you have a coarse flush on your face now, like a housemaid. Zai, I must really put my veto on your goings on."

"What goings on, mamma? It is deliciously cool under the trees and this room is quite stifling. What can it signify if my skin does tan a little; I love to be out in the grounds, where I can think comfortably."

"Think! what on earth can you have to think about, Zai?" Lady Beranger begins sternly, and Zai knows she is in for a lecture. "Girls of your age, if they are of properly-regulated minds, let others think for them. You have three or four serious duties in life to attend to. The first duty is to honour your father and mother and obey them implicitly; the second, is to take care of your looks, and to dress well; the third is——"

"To marry an eligible," Gabrielle chimes in pertly.

"Exactly!" Lady Beranger says calmly. "Your chief duty is to show your gratitude to your parents, for all they have done for you, by making a good match."

"I don't care for money," Zai murmurs meekly.

"Of course you don't; you don't care for anything, that you ought to care for, Zai. You positively ignore the fact of who you are, and forget common deference to society, which is, attention to the people around you. Last Thursday night, I heard Lady Vandeleur bewailing how *distraite* you were, and she smiled, Zai! smiled, quite in an aggravating way! She heard you reply to Lord Delaval when he asked for a valse: 'I'll take strawberry, please.' No wonder she hinted to me that you had something on your mind!"

"Poor old Lady Vandeleur fancies, perhaps, like Shakspeare, that Zai has—

'A madness most discreet,
A choking gall, and a preserving sweet!' "

suggests Gabrielle once more. "Why did you not tell her that your daughter is *stage struck*?"

"Your attempts at wit are dreadful, Gabrielle," Lady Beranger murmurs languidly. "Your tongue is, indeed, an unruly member."

"I really think Zai has softening of the brain," Trixy says spitefully. "She never remembers that her folly and eccentricity may compromise me. People might easily mistake one sister for the other."

Spite is Trixy's forte. Silky and saccharine, her tiny *pattes de velours* are always ready to creep out and

scratch. Her mother understands her nature, and tries to check feline propensities; but Trixy, like many of her sex, is a born cat.

"Zai is more likely to compromise herself than you. She will establish a reputation for being queer, and damage her chance of securing an eligible *parti*."

"I wish there was no such word in English as eligible," Gabrielle cries impetuously. "I hate the very sound of it. I suppose I am too low-born and democratic to appreciate the term. It seems to me, that every marriageable young woman should carry about a weighing-machine, and that, so long as Cyclops or any clod is heavily gilded—Hey! presto! he's the man."

Lady Beranger gives her a slow, level look, and wonders why such savages as Gabrielle exist.

"Please keep your *outré* notions to yourself," she remarks quietly. "My daughters have been taught to look on a good marriage as their due, and I am sure it never enters into their heads to degrade themselves by a *mésalliance*."

"I think poor men ever so much nicer than rich ones, mamma," Zai murmurs deprecatingly, and her white little hands nervously clasping and unclasping.

"Do you recollect Evelyn Ashley, mamma?" Trixy asks in a gentle, but hypocritical voice. "No one ever forgets that she fell in love with a riding-master, and was on the brink of eloping with him, when, luckily his horse threw him and he was killed. Of course, she is all right now, and very nice; but I don't believe anyone worth speaking of would dream of marrying her."

"I am sure an *eligible* never would!" Gabrielle says satirically.

Zai's grey eyes blaze, her little mouth quivers with excess of anger and indignation.

"By introducing that episode of Evelyn Ashley I conclude you mean to insinuate, Trixy, that her disgraceful affair is a parallel to what you think are my feelings for Carl?"

"Certainly. I call a riding-master quite as good, if not better, than an actor," Trixy retorts coolly, though Carl Conway is as much in her head as in Zai's heart.

"Gentlemen and officers have been forced through adverse circumstances to earn their bread by teaching riding, at least one hears of such cases. Of course it is not likely for *me* to have run across them," she adds with supreme arrogance and a little curl of her pretty lip.

"And you think anyone following the profession of an actor, from sheer love of his art, cannot be a gentleman? Not even if by birth he is one—and in fact related to the best blood in England?" Zai demands, quite haughtily, with a glitter in her glance which rather awes Trixy, who, like all bullies, is not very courageous when it comes to a stand-up fight.

But before Zai has a reply, Lady Beranger steps in with her low imperious voice:

"I am shocked at you both. Can it be possible that daughters of mine, girls supposed to be well-bred, should discuss such subjects, and throw yourselves into the violence of washerwomen, proving yourselves no better than the *canaille* in question. Zai, I see it is useless to try and reason with you. However, as I am your mother I am entitled to obedience, and I order you to abstain in the future from the society of Mr. Conway, so that, however much folly you may be guilty of, others will not be able to comment upon it."

No answer, but Zai's lids droop, and from beneath them big tears roll slowly down her cheeks, and her mouth quivers like a flogged child's.

"What a poor weak thing she is," Gabrielle thinks. "Why doesn't she hold her own, and set that mother of hers at defiance?"

But Zai does not care for defiance. Even in Belgravia she has been taught to honour her father and her mother, and her natural instincts are all for good.

"I must say, Zai," Lady Beranger goes on coldly and cruelly, "that it is a wonderment to me, this romantic, *low*, fancy for that young man. The whole thing reflects on the proper amount of pride you ought to possess. Has it by any chance struck you what this Mr. Conway, this *actor*, must think of you?"

"What *could* he think of me?" Zai asks quietly, with level half-closed eyes, but her assumption of courage is only skin deep. Anything unpleasant or invidious about *this actor*, as her mother scornfully calls him, causes her to tremble inwardly like an aspen leaf—her love, her own dear love, who, in her opinion, is higher than king or kaiser, simply because he is *himself*.

Lady Beranger calmly returns the gaze, and as she replies the words drop slowly from her lips, with a cool and merciless decision that is unwarrantable, considering that there are two pairs of ears besides Zai's to listen.

"Mr. Conway may think, without being especially vain, that he has made, without any effort of his own, a conquest of a silly love-sick girl, who has not enough of self-respect to conceal from him or others the magnitude of her folly."

Zai gives a half-suppressed cry of indignation, a cry that makes even Trixy forget she is a languid odalisque, and start from the repose of her downy cushions.

"How dare you insult me so, mamma!"

Her tone strikes like an electric shock on her audience, and Lady Beranger, pushing her chair back, rises and stands tall and regal in her wrath.

"Zai, have you lost your senses that you presume to address me so?" she asks in slow cutting accents.

Zai gives a gasp and shivers from head to foot, then she grows suddenly calm but for the storm in her eyes. Those grey eyes of hers—holy as a Madonna—are strangely disturbed, and their iris is several shades deeper.

"I beg your pardon, mamma!" she murmurs at last, with an effort. "When one is insulted, one does not stop to think *who* offers the insult. Perhaps this may excuse my having forgotten myself, but—" her voice waxes louder and her sweet mouth looks stronger—"if you think taunts or innuendos will estrange me from Carl, you are mistaken. I trust in him too entirely to believe he will ever think badly of me. I believe he loves me as much as I love him," and Zai, having delivered herself of this, picks up her hat and leaves the room.

"Good gracious!" cries Trixy. "I could not have believed Zai was so brazen. Fancy her flaunting her love for that Conway before us all!"

"Zai is frank as daylight," Gabrielle says, taking up the cudgels for her favourite sister. "That is more to be admired than those who perhaps have the same low tastes, but hide them under grand sentiments. I have seen you walk out of the room, as red as a turkey cock with anger, when Carl Conway has been talking to Zai!"

An unpleasant silence falls on the party after this, and Gabrielle stares at her stepmother, who, in spite of her annoyance looks like a Sphinx, and wishes herself an Œdipus, for to her a dissection of character is a fascinating study. But the *bien conservé* face before her has on its Richelieu waxen mask, and piques her by its impassiveness.

After a moment Lady Beranger sinks down into her chair again, pours out a second cup of tea, and butters a sixth piece of toast, then murmurs wearily:

"It would be impossible to say how much I have to bear with Zai. She is impressionable and wanting in pride! and she always forgets she is a Beranger. Just to think how wickedly she is in love with that Conway, that actor, whose good looks might captivate some women—but hardly a woman in *our* class. I told Lord Beranger a dozen times last season that it was the height of folly to have a play actor running loose about the house, but with the usual short-sightedness and obstinacy of men, he pooh-poohed me—and this is the result! There are plenty of detrimentals about, but they don't all get their living by ranting and raving on the stage, for the benefit of the mob! And besides, the creature hasn't a sou but his weekly salary, and spends so much on his gloves and gardenias that I am sure he has not saved a shilling to his name!"

"It's no good saying anything now. Zai is quite gone on Carl Conway. She is so queer too, she has even a heart, you know," Gabrielle says with a short laugh. "She is going to marry her actor, and nobody else. I would not mind betting——"

"Gabrielle!" cries Lady Beranger in a horror-struck voice, shutting up her ears with the points of her fore-fingers.

"I beg your pardon, my lady! I know 'betting' is an awful word in your opinion; I ought not to have said it. What I ought to have said was that Zai was such frightful spoons——"

"Gabrielle!" interrupts the severe voice again.

Gabrielle bursts out laughing, the horrified expression of her stepmother's face strikes her as so ludicrous, and her laugh is so infectious that Trixy joins in.

But Lady Beranger's unmistakable wrath nips the laughter in the bud, and after an instant, Gabrielle asks in rather a constrained voice:

"If you intend to nestle all day on those cushions, I really must go out, Trixy."

"Trixy will remain at home. I especially request it," decrees her mother.

"But I have no wish to see that horrid Mr. Stubbs," Trixy murmurs petulantly. "I'll be nasty to him if I am made to see him!"

"Trixy!"

"I promised Lord Delaval to work him a pair of slippers and I must go and choose the crewels," Trixy answers determinedly. "And besides, Mr. Hamilton and one or two of the Irish Fusiliers are going with Gabrielle and me to see the trysting well in Archer's Wood."

"And one admirer at home is not half so amusing as half-a-dozen outside, is he, Trixy?" says incorrigible Gabrielle.

"I wish you wouldn't amuse yourself at my expense always, Gabrielle! If you wish to know the truth, I do not want to go out to see all those men so much as I want to shop. I must have a new dress for the Annesleighs' ball on Monday, and I cannot trust you to order it. You haven't a bit of artistic taste and no eye for colours. In fact, your ideas are so wretchedly *bizarre*."

"Thanks! I never did go in for dress," Gabrielle answers flippantly. "You see beauty unadorned is adorned the most—but dolls are always prettier for the frocks they have on."

"You can go with me in the carriage to Stallard's and order the dress, Trixy—it will be much cooler, and less likely to hurt your complexion—after Mr. Stubbs' visit," Lady Beranger says suavely, but Trixy suddenly remembering the trip to Archer's Wood, and her host of admirers, frowns.

"We might see about that Honiton flounce you set your heart on the other day. It would be lovely on a pale blue merv. Stallard does not mind his account running on, so you had better get some tea roses to wear with it," Lady Beranger goes on carelessly, but noting that Trixy's eyes sparkle at the fine raiment in perspective. "And now, child, run up and change that tumbled muslin for your new mauve costume, or I shall not indulge you with the dress."

Trixy yields, and rising lazily, saunters out of the room. When she is fairly gone, Lady Beranger leans back in her gold-backed fauteuil, and partially closes her fine eyes.

"How thankful I shall be to get Trixy off my hands. She is so dreadfully extravagant and so eaten up with vanity. Nothing short of pale blue merv, and the Honiton, which costs about three guineas a yard (Stallard sticks it on so for credit, always), would have made her see Stubbs to-day, and yet, he is a ——"

"Millionaire," she was going to say, when she remembers Gabrielle's presence.

"Gabrielle, if you are going out, I wish you could drag Zai with you. She sits moping in the grounds after that horrid actor fellow until her brain will soften to keep her heart company. What a frightful anxiety marriageable daughters are!"

"Poor dear martyr," Gabrielle murmurs. "I do believe I am the only consolation you have in your troubles, though I do jar on your nerves, and am perpetually kicking against those tiresome convenances."

Lady Beranger smiles icily.

"You certainly give me less trouble than Trixy and Zai, as far as love and marriage are concerned," she replies pointedly. "In fact, it would perhaps be better if it were otherwise!" and Gabrielle, who is sharp as a

needle, colours, and understands that the speech is simply a taunt that no one has offered to take her off her stepmother's hands.

When she is quite alone Lady Beranger breathes more freely.

"I distrust that girl," she mutters. "She is so intensely clever and cunning, yet she might be a help to me. She loves Lord Delaval desperately, and to gain her own ends she will make Trixy marry Stubbs, and Baby Mr. Hamilton. So far, so good. Both men are rolling in wealth, and she will be so afraid of Lord Delaval fancying Zai, that she will force her into being a duchess or a princess. Zai is such a little fool, Gabrielle can twist her round her little finger. As for Conway, it is no use my bothering myself about him. Men in his position must find their own level; and only annoy like the sting of a passing gnat."

Just as she comes to this conclusion a loud rat-tat resounds through the big house.

It is not a refined or timid knock, but decidedly obtrusive, yet it does not, strange to say, offend the delicate ear of Belgravia.

Lady Beranger draws herself together, as it were. She has been considerably ruffled at afternoon tea, but she composes her face into the sweet serenity it generally wears before the world.

"Show Mr. Stubbs in," she desires, when the powdered flunkey hands her a card. "And, Theophrastus! not at home to any other visitors."

She knows that the gentlemen staying at Sandilands have driven some distance, and are not likely to be back till dinner-time. So she is safe to prepare the way for Trixy's future benefit. After all, is it worth while to envy Lady Beranger her charming home? or would not a dinner of herbs, when love and truth and honesty abound, be preferable to the stalled ox, and strife and scheming?

"How do you do, Mr. Stubbs?" she says, graciously, when a short, very obese man, and plain of feature, walks into the boudoir. He is very red in the face, both from exercise and from fond expectations, and he is not very ready of speech.

Lady Beranger eyes him keenly a moment from the top of his shining bald head to the foot, which is dumpty and decidedly plebeian.

He is certainly not a typical lover for the fairest *débutante* of 1886. But what matters?

He is Peter Stubbs, with a superb mansion in Park Lane, a gem of a place in Hampshire, and fifty thousand a year.

Does it signify one atom if he is as hideous as a gorilla, or as old as Mount Horeb?

Not in the very least.

"Trixy will be so charmed to see you, Mr. Stubbs. She was just complaining of the country, and longing for some civilised London friend to come and enliven her—rustic neighbours are so very uninteresting, you know."

Mr. Peter Stubbs reddens as if he were developing apoplectic symptoms, and smiles till he looks even more ugly than his wont.

"Did Miss Beatrix think of *me* when she longed for that civilised Londoner?" he asks with a simper. Trixy enters at this moment and makes an unmistakable *moue* at this question, but she is Lady Beranger's daughter.

While she has been donning her mauve costume and thinking how nice she looks in it, she has realised the gratification it would be to have a *carte blanche* account at Worth's.

"Of course I did, Mr. Stubbs," she gushes effusively, with a beaming smile, "do you think I have forgotten already our charming chats in Belgrave Square, and our teas at your paradise in Park Lane?"

And she holds out a lovely plump hand, white as milk, which Mr. Stubbs takes and squeezes warmly.

"I see Zai at the far end of the lawn, I want to speak to her, so excuse me for a few minutes, Mr. Stubbs," Lady Beranger says with delicious affability.

"Certainly! certainly! your ladyship. Miss Beatrix and I can manage to get along together remarkably well, I am sure; maybe we shall not mind if you find a good deal to say to Miss Zai," he answers with a wink.

"Cad!" Lady Beranger mutters to herself as she steps out of the French casement. "Cad! vulgar wretch! Trixy will be thrown away on him, that is, her beauty will—as for herself, she is so avaricious and selfish that his money will make up for everything. Good Heavens! whose voices are those?"

She crosses the lawn noiselessly, threads the shrubbery, and steals behind a clump of elms.

It is the identical spot where Zai had held her rose-coloured reverie this morning.

A few paces further on, with the elm branches drooping low as if to conceal them from view, but with the yellow rays of the setting sun falling on them, two heads, one close-cropped, the other crowned with ruddy chesnut, had been very near to one another, and these heads belonged to Zai and that "horrid actor fellow."

Carl Conway's arm had been round a slender waist, and Zai's sweet face upturned so that a moustached lip might rest on her coral mouth; but when Lady Beranger sees these two culprits, they have said good-bye, and are a discreet distance from one another.



CHAPTER IV.

LORD DELAVAL.

"We played at Bondsman and at Queen,
But as the days change—men change too;
I find the grey seas' notes of green,
The green seas' fervent flakes of blue,
More fair than you."

ALL the amber and purple and gold of the western sky has faded away, and only a faint rose glow lingers. The wind is dead, and soft and fragrant dusk lies like a mantle on the fair world, but the mantle of twilight is edged with the silver lustre of a tender young moon, and a shoal of inquisitive stars begin to peep at each other, when Gabrielle passes quickly upstairs and knocks at a door adjoining her own.

"Come in."

Zai stands before her cheval-glass—a thing of beauty in a shimmering white silk, pore and virginal, a cluster of blush *Noisette* roses nestle in her bosom, and there is a bright flush on her cheek that adds tenfold to her loveliness.

"You have come for Fanchette, Gabrielle, but the bird has flown; only five minutes sooner you would have caught her. Trixy and Baby wanted her, and though I had not quite finished with her, I let her go."

"Trixy and Baby are the most selfish creatures I know," Gabrielle answers captiously. "Why cannot they stick to Marie? I am sure they might teach her to dress them, without continually asking for Fanchette. *Au diable* with those girls! Please don't look so shocked, Zai. It is not half as bad as 'Go to the Devil' in English, and yet it is quite as relieving to one's feelings. How on earth am I to get my hair done properly?"

"For the Meredyths' 'At Home?' "

"Of course. Do you know, Zai, Lady Beranger has asked Sir Everard Aylmer to go with us, and expressly confided him to my tender mercies."

Zai opens her eyes and laughs.

"You see, Sir Everard has singled me out lately as an object of attention, and has actually talked to me for five consecutive minutes, somewhere about five times during our acquaintance—a frail basis to anchor hope on. Nevertheless, the step-mother, who, in spite of her ultra refinement, is an inveterate match-maker, has hatched a matrimonial project in her prolific brain for my benefit. You know I am like a bad shilling, always on her hands, and she would gladly see the last of me; but there is of course, as you know, another arrangement. She is anxious to kill two birds with one stone."

"What can you mean, Gabrielle? You have the most marvellous fertility of imagination that I have ever met with. If anyone drops a lash, you discover a reason for the action, and the most trivial word, lightly spoken, possesses a mountain of meaning to your mind. What motive can mamma have, but one?"

"*Eh bien!*"

"She knows Sir Everard Aylmer is rich and has an old baronetcy, and she wants you to make a good marriage. Sir Everard is quite an 'eligible' you know."

"Lady Beranger's scheme doesn't concern Sir Everard or poor little me. We are a couple of noughts in her eyes, and she is not going to trouble her brain with machinations about us. The head and the tail of the matter is—*Lord Delaval!*"

"I *must* be a simpleton or else you are too clever by half, Gabrielle. What on earth can you and Sir Everard and Lord Delaval have to do with one another?"

"Zai, you haven't the tenth part of an inch the sharpness of Baby! the understanding of *that* child is miraculous. Well, I'll tell you all that is passing in Lady Beranger's head. To-night Trixy makes her appearance in public as the future Honourable Mrs. Stubbs! Heavens! what a name! By the way, what a short matter they made of that. Only three days ago she hated the sight of him, and now her destiny is *une affaire faite*."

"Well?"

"Then—but you surely see through it all?"

"Not a bit."

"You *are* a simpleton, Zai. Don't you see that this is a splendid chance for you and Lord Delaval to be together. I shall be bear leader to Sir Everard, so you will have it all your own way."

"If I thought Lord Delaval was to be my attraction to-night, I would throw over the Meredyths, and go to bed," Zai says carelessly.

"But why? This is simply a little arrangement by which Lady Beranger hopes to allow poor Lord Delaval to insinuate himself in your good graces, Zai. For you know he admires you awfully, now don't you?" she asks, with a fierce jealousy making her tone tremulous. "And I am sure if he does, *I* don't wish to be Mademoiselle de Trop," she adds impatiently.

"Don't talk nonsense, Gabrielle. Lord Delaval is in love with Baby, if he is in love with anyone but—*himself*."

"In love with Baby!" echoes Gabrielle, scornfully. "I am sure he was never in love with her, and that he has a contempt for her fast, flirty ways."

"Well, if he does not care for Baby, and wants a Beranger, he will have to marry you," Zai says quietly.

"But it's *necessary* for you all to marry rich men. You *must*."

"Why?"

"Because, when your father and mother go over to the majority, you will be paupers."

"Anyway, I am going to marry Carl," Zai asserts positively. "And I would not go to the Meredyths' this evening, only he is staying at Elm Lodge."

Gabrielle bursts out laughing.

"Good gracious, what a *fiasco* it is! Lady Beranger will murder him, I believe. You won't be allowed to speak to him."

"Nobody could prevent——"

Zai pauses, for at this moment Fanchette trips into the room.

Gabrielle greets her effusively.

"*Dieu merci*, Fanchette! Now I may hope to get my hair done. Zai, don't wait for me to go down. Have Miss Trixy and Miss Mirabelle gone down yet, Fanchette?"

"Just this moment, mademoiselle."

"And how do they look?"

"Miss Trixy is *ravissante*. She was very *difficile*, nothing would please her. I tried coiffure *à la Ninon*, or ringlets *à la Cascade*, or the simple plaits English mees likes."

"And which has she gone down as—Ninon or the Cascade?" Gabrielle asks with a smile.

"Not one or the other, mademoiselle. She would have her head done with the weeds of the waves, and also *des petites bêtes*, I don't know what you call them, fastened into it like a *syrène*.

"*Ah, oui!* I understand. She is a mermaid to-night, with sea-weeds and shell-fish. I can well imagine Mademoiselle Trixy *difficile*; being an angel to men and an angel to one's *femme-de-chambre* are two different things. Fanchette, make me very beautiful to-night."

"*Mais, oui!* Mademoiselle has the grand capability to be so." And in a few moments her skilful fingers have gathered up Gabrielle's lustrous tresses into a sort of crown, which becomes her well.

"How nice I should look in the Delaval coronet," Gabrielle thinks, as she admires herself in the glass, with a truthfulness befitting a better cause.

Meanwhile Zai has descended the staircase, and, as she reaches the great square hall, Lord Beranger enters the house.

"Good evening, papa," she says, lovingly twining her arm into his, "I was afraid I was late, but it seems it must be early, as you have only just come in."

"Good evening, my pet," says papa to this, his favourite daughter. "You are quite right in thinking it is late, but we have been taking our post-prandial cigar and coffee under the stars. Might I ask what you are so radiant for? Is there a big party on to-night?"

"The Meredyths' 'At Home,' you know. Is it possible you have forgotten that Trixy is to make her *débût* to-night as an engaged young person?"

"Ugh!" Lord Beranger mutters to himself, half aloud. "Poor Trixy!" Then he remembers his wife's admonition, and goes on blandly: "Stubbs isn't a bad sort, Zai; a little too much flesh, and a little, too little, breeding; but we can't have everything, child, and money makes the mare to go."

"I hate money," Zai answers in a low voice. "I would not marry Mr. Stubbs if he were ten times richer."

"Tut, tut, my pet. You must get romantic notions out of your head—romance doesn't pay now-a-days. Good hard cash down, that's the thing, and when you have nailed that, it's time enough to indulge in other fancies."

"Papa, how wicked you are. That's one of Mamma's sentiments. I don't like to hear you say anything that is not right."

"Don't you? well, I won't. Kiss me, little one, as a proof of forgiveness."

Zai goes on tiptoe, and putting her arms round his neck, kisses him heartily, forgetful of the detriment to her bouquet of *Noisette* roses.

"Yes, Zai. It really quite escaped me that to-night Trixy makes her *entrée* into Society as an affianced one. Poor Trixy! And yet she is no object for pity, since Stubbs can supply her with all the gew-gaws she loves. Trixy always puts me in mind of that infant-mind that is pleased with a rattle—tickled with a straw. There is a charming youthfulness in her tastes, and a curious indifference in the manner by which she can satisfy them, that always puzzles me. There were never two natures so dissimilar as yours and hers. One could hardly believe you were children of the same parents. Trixy is so indolent and content, and you are just the reverse, my pet," he goes on with a smile. "I suppose Delaval is back—he left us after luncheon at Kingsfold, saying he had something to do at Southampton—gloves to get, or something. And I am not surprised at his wanting to get back here, where he has such attractive metal, hasn't he, Zai?"

"I don't know anything about it, papa; nor do I wish to," Zai flashes rather impetuously. "I see nothing interesting in Lord Delaval."

"Don't you?" Lord Beranger says rather curtly. "Delaval seems to have faults in your eyes that no other woman appears to discover. Why, do you know, Zai, there is no man admired or run after by the fair sex—from the Upper Ten downwards—as Lord Delaval?"

"Possibly," is Zai's reply. And she bites her lips to keep from saying more, and walks with her father into a small room in which coffee is going on, amidst lights and flowers and baskets of fruit.

Up at the far end Lady Beranger, and her son-in-law elect, Mr. Stubbs, are sitting. The millionaire has only just arrived, and, while he imbibes the scalding Mocha, out of egg-shell china, he looks anxiously at his pair of new primrose gloves, one of which has burst down the back, and at his lady-love, who sits some distance off.

As a matter of bodily comfort, Trixy would infinitely prefer her usual downy nest among the sky-blue cushions, but whatever may be her shortcomings in other respects, she always knows better than to allow her toilette and her surroundings to *jurier* at each other, as the French say.

An instinct, the artistic instinct, that seems to be born with some women, to whom art itself is quite a dead letter, serves to guide this daughter of Belgravia aright, and being cast for Sabrina to-night, in sea-green silk and misty lace, and coral and seaweed, and all the other concomitants that Gabrielle had yclept shell-fish—and Fanchette *les petites bêtes*—she keeps clear of blue back-ground. Effect is a grand thing in her estimation, and it is the apparent study of her existence to attain it.

She converses languidly with Mr. Hamilton, never casting a glance at her "future," whose red face grows redder and redder, as he remarks her indifference.

Within the embrasure of the big bay window that gives on to the lawn, lolls Baby.

She is sweet to-night, clouds of snowy tulle float round her lovely little figure, and she wears no ornament but one magnificent poinsettia that droops over her left shoulder. Her golden hair, her great innocent blue eyes, her exquisite flower of a mouth, are all bewitching in their way, and so a man seems to think, who lounges carelessly over the back of her chair, partially concealed by the velvet hangings, but who raises his face when Lord Beranger and Zai enter, disclosing the features of Lord Delaval.

Lord Delaval is—as Gabrielle has said—superbly handsome. He is tall and his figure is slender, almost to fragility, though not without certain signs of muscular strength, that a pugilist's eye would recognise at once.

There is quite an elegance about his figure, a *je ne sais quoi* of thoroughbred style that renders Eric, Lord Delaval, a marked man in any assemblage, and his undeniably picturesque face does him right good service as an excellent passport wherever he goes.

A very handsome face it is, and a fatally fascinating one for those women to whom it appeals, with its Saxon beauty of fair, almost colourless, skin, faultless features, hair almost tawny in hue, straight eyebrows, cleanly pencilled, and deep blue eyes of eminent softness, and yet a softness that no one would mistake for gentleness. In spite of his fairness, no one could call him effeminate—on the contrary, men looking at him feel at once that he is not to be trifled with, and that his keen, fearless, determined physiognomy, indicates a nature ready to meet any emergency, and not likely to quail before any obstacle.

Not always, nor altogether, a pleasant face, by any means, but one with an attractive force about it that it is impossible to deny, and sometimes very difficult to resist.

This is the man that Baby had once cared for in her wilful, childish way, and with whom she still loves to coquet, and this is the man that Gabrielle Beranger worships with all the fire and energy of her fierce, unsatisfied nature, while he only thinks of himself and his own interests. To him, women are but instruments to reach a wished-for goal, or toys to amuse and be broken—foolish fluttering butterflies on whom he looks with a good deal of contempt, and whom he carelessly crushes in his grasp.

Clever and self-sufficient, feminine brains are beneath his notice, feminine minds unworthy of deciphering.

So many beautiful women have laid the treasures of their heart at his feet that he has learnt to look on a "woman's heart" as easy of access, and not especially valuable in possession; still, Lord Delaval likes to win them in a quiet, subtle way, if it is only for the feline gratification of playing with and torturing them by turns, till he is sick of them and throws them aside.

He is only a type of most of his sex, after all, especially the portion of his sex who wear the purple, feed on clover, and grow enervated in luxury.

He and Miss Mirabelle (who looks to-night too old for her appellation of Baby) make a pretty, lover-like tableau enough, as they sit close together in the embrasure of the window, ensconced in half shade, with the soft night, full of mystic stars, and the silent, fragrant flowers in the background.

Yet Lord Delaval's face, when he raises it from whispering in Baby's ear, wears anything but a lover-like expression. Stolid indifference is in his handsome eyes, and a cynical smile on his lips, but the moment Zai enters, he grows more animated, and rising, walks towards her.

"Don't you think we shall be very late, Miss Zai? It is not a large affair, I hear, and we shall be disturbing Miss Crystal Meredyth in the middle of '*Tais toi mon cœur!*' "

Zai winces slightly at Crystal's name, but recovers herself at once.

"May I not be allowed a cup of tea?" she asks, looking up at him with her big, grey eyes, in which he thinks there is something of the gleaming yet transparent lustre that water shows under a starlit sky. For a moment these eyes catch his fancy, and influence his imagination, but only for a moment.

Lord Delaval at heart is a rock, and a rock that no woman's hand has as yet succeeded in making a cleft in.

"Yes, there's time enough for that, and indeed, I will keep you company. Tea is a blessing to the race of mankind—and womankind, too," he goes on languidly, as he sips. "But tea is a paradox; it calms one's turbulent feelings, and yet it is a mighty stimulant and keeps one awake—and it is for this last of its properties that I indulge in it to-night."

"To keep you awake!" cries Zai, eyeing him rather contemptuously, as she listens to what she considers his soulless remarks. "Are you likely to fall asleep among the music and singing and chatter then, or are you so wrapped up in your noble self, that no one or nothing can interest you?"

He wanted to provoke her to speak to him, and he has succeeded. Her contempt does not touch him a bit, in fact, it makes her more *piquante*, and gives a spice to society "twaddle." There is an utter coldness in her towards him that frets his *amour propre*; it is so different to other women; and he longs intensely to subdue her, as he has subdued scores of girls whom he has desired to subjugate and make mere puppets in his hand.

He draws his chair nearer to hers, and settles himself as if he has forgotten the flight of time and the disturbance of Crystal Meredyth's favourite French ditty, and makes up his mind to try and draw Zai's young heart into his net with the skill of an experienced fowler.

Just at this moment, Mr. Stubbs finishes his cup of coffee at a gulp, and rising up in a perfect steam, betakes himself and his primrose-coloured kids to the lovely Sabrina opposite.

"A man or a porpoise—which?" whispers Lord Delaval with a mocking smile, as he watches the millionaire's progress across the room.

"At any rate, if he is a porpoise, we have an opportunity of studying a little zoology, and finding out that porpoises are by no means laggards in love," laughs Zai. "Look how eagerly he goes, though there is nothing very encouraging in Trixy's face. She forgets to beam on him as she does on other men!"

"And who can blame her? Don't you think it must require a vast deal of gold to gild that creature's bulky form, and a vast deal of avarice and interestedness in a woman to take him for better—for worse?" Lord Delaval asks, with a sneer.

"I should think you must be almost tired of sneering at everyone, Lord Delaval, or is it a chronic habit of

yours?" Zai questions carelessly. "You see, if some men have the misfortune to lack beauty and refinement, there may be some as handsome and polished as yourself."

"Are there many of the same nonpareils, Miss Zai, or do you think there is only—one?" he answers, with a lame attempt at jesting, but the most obtuse can see he is nettled.

"There may be many for aught I know. That there is *one*, I *do* know," she returns quickly.

"Granting even so—pray does one swallow make a summer?"

"Not exactly, but you have a hateful habit of running people down, Lord Delaval, a habit that to my mind is not to be admired."

"I know what you mean," he answers flushing a little. "Just because I happened to say, during our last valse at your ball the other night, that a man, because he chooses to lower himself, cannot lift his new *confrères* to the grade which he has forfeited, but remains lost himself, to his family, and to Society. I could say a deal more on this subject."

"Please don't edify me with it," cries Zai impatiently, "I do not care to hear any dissertations on it. You never lose an opportunity to sneer at Mr. Conway, and Mr. Conway's profession, and it is hopeless to rebuke you for it, or even to notice your remarks."

"Zai, I think you are giving your unruly member too much licence. Lord Delaval must be horrified at such unconventional talk," Lady Beranger breaks in angrily from behind.

"Oh let little Zai prattle," Paterfamilias says indulgently. "Delaval must be sick of conventional talk, and her unworldly wisdom must be quite refreshing. Besides, animation becomes her style of beauty."

"I am sorry if I treated Lord Delaval to a lecture, mamma, it is a great waste of breath I know," Zai replies wilfully, ignoring her mother's warning glance, "but he seems to find no subject so interesting as abuse of Mr. Conway."

"To the best of my knowledge, I did not mention his name even," Lord Delaval says in a martyr-like tone, "but you always treat me cruelly, Miss Zai. I confess I do not care about actors being dragged into Society as they are. They ought to be kept in their places."

"There are actors, and *actors*, I suppose," Zai says flushing deeply, "and I don't see that a gentleman is the least bit not a gentleman, no matter what profession he follows."

"Then you would call a chimney-sweep a gentleman, Zai, if he happened to have been *born* one," Lady Beranger asks in a suave voice.

"There is some difference between the calling of a sweep and an actor, mamma. You may all differ with me in my opinion on this subject, but I cannot help holding to my notions, and speaking them out truthfully."

"Truth is not always to be told, my pet. Whatever the ancients thought on the subject of unerring veracity, it is an exploded error! *Nous avons changé tout cela!*" Lord Beranger ordains with the air of a modern Lycurgus.

"I shall never consider it an error to speak plain unvarnished truth, papa," Zai says fearlessly.

"One would think you had been born in Arcadia, and not in Belgravia," Lady Beranger remarks angrily. "I only hope that Lord Delaval may feel more indulgent towards such *bizarre* sentiments than I do."

"Of course Delaval will be indulgent. Did you ever know any young fellow who was not indulgent to a pretty girl's fads and follies? There are men, and *men*, as Zai says. You are a peer, Delaval, and Conway is an actor. I have remarked that the feminine element, now-a-days, inclines to a weakness for the stage. Thespian votaries, what with their shows, and their glitter, their stereotyped smiles, their parrot love-making, have a subtle charm," Lord Beranger suggests, more for an emollient for Lord Delaval's evidently wounded vanity than for any genuine faith in his own words.

"I think the difference in our callings is not the only distinction that Miss Zai makes between myself and Carlton Conway," Lord Delaval says with a meaning glance that brings a scarlet flush to the girl's face, and makes her lower her long curling lashes over her tell-tale eyes.

Then he leans his handsome head against the tall backed chair he occupies, and watches the flicker of the lovely colour, and the lashes, through his half-closed eyes, with a glance she could not help to *feel*, although she studiously avoids meeting it.

Lord Beranger moves away a few paces, and his better-half follows him, then Lord Delaval bends forward again till his breath sweeps Zai's cheek, and he asks in a low concentrated voice that is inaudible to others:

"There is another distinction between Carlton Conway and myself, is there not?"

"Yes!" she answers frankly, for she glories in her love and her lover. "There is a distinction between you, and you know what it is."

"I do not know why you should think so well of him, and evidently so ill of me."

"Don't you? then I will tell you. I believe Mr. Conway to be as open as the day, to have no narrowness in his heart, no pettiness in his soul. He could no more shackle himself with the opinion of "society" than he could stoop to do a mean thing. In fact I know he has such a true gentleman-like nature, that if he were reduced to a blacksmith's calling he would be a gentleman in the estimation of all those whose judgment is worth having."

She says it all hastily, impetuously, taking up the cudgels for the man she adores with all her heart, a sweet pink flush on her face, fervour shining out of her grey eyes. Lord Delaval stares at her hard, with a sudden hot red spot on his usually pale cheek, and with a kindling glance, but his voice is languid and cold enough.

"Let us have the reverse picture," he whispers in a mocking voice.

"No occasion, it is not an interesting topic," she answers carelessly.

"Of course it is not! You have made me understand, perhaps too often, the opinion you have of *me*, the atrocious number of faults you endow me with. I should be a thousand times blacker than the traditional blackness of the Devil, if I were all you think," he says rather bitterly.

His tone vexes her, and the colour deepens while her eyes glow, and just at this moment Gabrielle enters,

and takes in the whole situation. As she crosses the long room towards them, Lord Delaval puts his head down low, and almost hisses out his words.

"You make me *hate* Conway. I see he is the bar to every hope I have in life."

Then he walks away, and in another moment is whispering into Baby's ear while she laughs and coquets to her heart's content.

"You should always talk to Lord Delaval if you wish to look well, Zai," Gabrielle says angrily. "It is wonderful the colour he has evoked on your cheeks, and the light in your eyes."

CHAPTER V.

CROSS PURPOSES.

"Though matches are all made in Heaven, they say,
Yet Hymen, who mischief oft hatches,
Sometimes deals with the house t'other side of the way,
And there they make lucifer matches."

"I SAW Conway riding with Crystal Meredyth this afternoon, looking awfully spooney." This is what Zai overhears Sir Everard Aylmer say in his inane drawl to Gabrielle, in the carriage, on the way to Elm Lodge.

A lump of ice seems to settle down on her heart, and two small, very cold, hands clasp one another under her white cloak; but she is a daughter of Belgravia, and to a certain extent true to her colours; so when she walks into Mrs. Meredyth's not over-spacious, but unpleasantly crowded room, her face shows no emotion, and the only effect of Everard Aylmer's words, is a lovely pink flush, that makes Carlton Conway's affianced wife tenfold more attractive.

And it is fortunate that, young as she is, her breeding has taught her self-control; for the first thing her grey eyes fall on is her lover and Crystal Meredyth floating round the room, and very much enjoying their valse, to all appearances.

So Zai turns away from that which is dearest to her in the world, and turns towards Lord Delaval, who, either by chance or on purpose, stands at her side.

As Zai looks up in the peer's face, she acknowledges, for the first time, that he is certainly a handsome man. And, indeed, there cannot be two opinions on this score. He is as handsome as the Apollo Belvedere—a fact of which he is quite as well aware as his neighbours.

Tall and slim, his hair a fair golden, his eyes ultramarine to their deepest depths, his features perfect, his mouth carved like a cameo, and almost as hard. Yet, however vain he may be, there is nothing really offensive in his vanity, nothing of that arrogant self-conceit, that overpowering self-complacency, that makes puppyism a mild epithet to apply to some men.

Lord Delaval is spoilt, of course—an *enfant gâté* of the fair sex, and prone to that general masculine failing of fancying himself perfectly irresistible; but on the whole, women adore him, and men pronounce him "not a bad sort."

At the present moment he suffers from *embarras des richesses*; for he knows that Gabrielle and Baby are both delightfully disposed towards him and—wonder of wonders—Zai seems to have suddenly awakened to a proper appreciation of him as well.

But he is quite equal to any emergency of this kind. In his heart he admires Zai more than any of the Beranger family, and—he detests Carlton Conway.

"Shall we have a turn?" he asks.

She assents at once as she meets the ultramarine smiling eyes. And they too float round and round the room. They both waltz splendidly, and when Carl pauses a moment to give his partner breathing time, his eye falls at once on them, and in the same moment, someone remarks near him:

"What a handsome couple Delaval and Zai Beranger make."

Before, however, he has time to recover his anger and jealousy, Zai and her escort have disappeared out on the lawn.

Ever since she could toddle Zai has held her own. No one in the world is better able to paddle her own canoe than this beautiful little daughter of Belgravia, and from sheer feelings of pique, she is positively satisfied with the companion on whose arm she wanders through the flowery walks of Elm Lodge. There are plenty of other couples doing the same thing, so there is nothing against the convenances. And Zai knows that her mother is at this moment revelling in dreams of Lord Delaval for a son-in-law.

"Let her revel if she likes," Zai says to herself. "I shall marry Carl all the same."

And even while she soliloquises thus, she teems with coquetry; but it is a coquettishness that is perfectly subordinate to good taste, and her instincts are all those which come from gentle breeding.

There is in her none of the making of what we call a fast young lady. When time has fully opened the flower, it will be of a higher order than any of those gaudy blossoms. Only nineteen, she shows a grace and subtlety, and a *savoir faire* that astonishes Lord Delaval, and then, though beauty is only skin deep, Zai is so very beautiful. After all, this must be set down as her chief attraction.

There is a bewildering charm about her little face that words cannot describe—a deliciousness about her soft colouring, and her great, grey eyes are brimful of a liquid provoking light, as they look up at her cavalier and tell him, in mute but powerful language, that he finds favour in their sight, although it must be confessed it is for "this night only." Her cheeks are still flushed, and smiles play on her pretty mouth, and, like all women, this bit of a girl is surely a born actress, for the man of the world, wary as he deems himself, and skilled in all the wiles of the sex, really believes that he has done her injustice in crediting her with a *grande passion* for "that actor fellow," and is satisfied that, like Julius Cæsar, he has conquered.

Presently the flowery paths are deserted as the sweet strains of "Dreamland" fall on them. Zai shivers a little as she remembers that to these she valed last with Carl—Carl, who is so monopolised with Crystal Meredyth that he has evidently forgotten the existence of any other woman.

Pique and jealousy drive her to lingering on in these dim-lit grounds. Pique and jealousy make her little hand cling closer to Lord Delaval's arm, and her manner and voice softer to him; but the conveniences must be considered. She is too much Belgravian to forget them. So she says:

"Had we not better think of going back to the ball-room?"

"Why should we?" Lord Delaval murmurs softly.

Enchanted with his companion, he has no inclination to return to the beauties of whom he is sick and tired.

"I am sure the lawn is delicious; but if you wish to go in, of course, let us go."

"No, I do not exactly wish to go in," she answers hesitatingly. Just this particular night she does not desire to vex him. She wants, in fact, to *afficher* herself with him, only to show Carlton Conway that other men appreciate her fully, if he doesn't. "But we have been out for some time. You see we are left sole monarchs of all we survey, and mamma may entertain a faint sensation of wonder as to what has become of me."

He smiles under cover of his blond moustache; he knows Lady Beranger is perfectly aware with whom her daughter is "doing the illuminated lawns," and that, as he happens to be an eligible, she does not trouble further.

"Let her wonder," he answers languidly. "It is very good for her, don't you know? Wondering develops the—the speculative faculties. Don't go in just yet. It is so seldom I get a chance of talking to you quietly. There are always such a lot of bothering people about!"

"Do you mean Gabrielle or Baby?" she says with a laugh, though her heart is aching dreadfully, and even as she talks, she can in her mind's eye see her Carl looking into Crystal Meredyth's china blue eyes, as if those eyes were the stars of his existence.

"I mean—*Conway*—tell me, do you really care for him as—as much as you have made me think you do?"

A flutter of leaves in a neighbouring shrubbery makes her look round.

There, against the dense dark foliage, stands out in relief like a billow of the sea, the pale green diaphanous garments which Crystal Meredyth wears to-night, and close beside her a tall figure, that Zai knows too well.

Her heart beats fast and a blinding mist seems to rise before her vision, but she has not been tutored by Lady Beranger in vain.

"Have you yet to learn, Lord Delaval, that women do not exactly wear their hearts on their sleeves for daws to peck at?" she says with a low musical laugh, "or do you think Mr. Conway so irresistible that no one can resist him?"

As she almost whispers this, her conscience is troubled with a compunctious throb, her glance seeks the tiny, almost invisible, chain to which the locket containing Carl's picture is attached, and out of the cloistered greenness and dimness Carl Conway's handsome face seems to look at her reproachfully for denying her love for him.

"So glad to hear you speak like this!" Lord Delaval murmurs quite tenderly, and he slightly presses against him the little hand lying so snow-white on his arm, "especially as a little bird has told me something."

"What has it told you?" Zai asks carelessly, while her eyes follow the two figures of her evidently inconstant lover and his companion, with a pathos and wistfulness in their depths that the dusk luckily hides from Lord Delaval.

"It told me that Conway is going to marry Miss Meredyth."

For half an instant Zai forgets her Belgravian training. Under the Chinese lanterns her cheeks grow white as death, and there is an unmistakable tremor in her voice as she says:

"Are they engaged? But it is not possible!" she adds more slowly.

"Why isn't it possible?" asks Lord Delaval, rousing out of languor into a suspicious condition. "Is it because he has been trying to make you believe that Miss Meredyth's bank stock and horses and diamonds are of no importance in his opinion?"

"Miss Meredyth's money," Zai says in a low voice. "I—I did not know she was very rich!" Then she cries impetuously:

"How contemptible it is for a man to be mercenary."

"Some men cannot help being so," he replies quietly. "For instance, what can fellows like Conway, who have no substantial means at all, do?"

"Do? Why—"

"To go and hang yourselves, for being yourselves.' "

quoths Zai flippantly, as she moves towards the house.

Suddenly she pauses, she *cannot* go in just now into the crowded ball-room and look with calmness on her faithless—faithless lover.

Ah! how unutterably wretched she is. She feels as if life were over for her, now that Carl is going to marry Miss Meredyth.

"I have got such a headache," she says wearily (she might say heartache), "and if I go into that suffocating room, it will be worse. Then to-morrow I shall make my appearance at breakfast with great haggard eyes, red-rimmed and underlined with bistre shades, and a horrid white face that will draw down *such* a scolding from mamma and Trixy! *You* know well enough all I shall have to endure."

The trivial bond of sympathy which her stress on the "you" seems to indicate sounds strangely pleasant

to his ears, but he preserves a silence, though he gazes at her fixedly.

For, under the flickering light, Zai is truly a thing of beauty and a joy for ever.

"Lord Delaval, *will* you do me a very great favour?" she pleads prettily, glancing up at him.

"Of course!" he answers rather dreamily. He is a Society man, a scoffer at sentiment, an Atheist in love, but this little girl's ways and proximity exercise a curious influence over him. They are in fact something like the opium trance, of which De Quincey gives so wonderful a description in the "Suspiria."

He is conscious of an intense longing that the favour she asks will be to kiss her! He feels at this moment that he would willingly give up everything in the world, his successes of the past, his hopes for the future, his schemes in the present, just for the sake of touching this soft scarlet mouth once,

"To waste his whole soul in one kiss
Upon these perfect lips,"

in fact, but there is an inexplicable sensation of reverence for her that no other woman has ever raised in his breast.

And there is a purity in the face shewing up in the semi-light, that fills him, *blasé* as he is—satiated as he is, with a wonderment that no woman's face has ever created in him before.

"I want to go right round the garden."

The request is so simple, so childish, that it brings him down at once from the height to which imagination has raised him to practical every-day existence, and he laughs aloud at his own sentimental folly.

"But what will they say to our escapade? The garden is a large one, and it is close upon twelve o'clock now. You know how strict Lady Beranger's notions are regarding the *bienséances*, and that such a nocturnal excursion will be in her eyes, flagrant. Unless indeed," and he lowers his voice to the most harmonious key, "you were with a man you were engaged to!"

She does not seem to hear, or else she does not heed, the concluding words of his sentence, a deafness and indifference on her part that rails him considerably.

"If I were Gabrielle, I should answer, *au diable* with anyone who wants to coerce me, especially when what I wish to do is innocent enough. As it is, those dreadful bogies of my life, *convenances* and *bienséances*, must be infringed, the flagrancy of a nocturnal escapade braved, for I *will* go round the garden, and you, Lord Delaval, you will surely be kind enough to stay here quietly under these lovely trees, until I come. Don't let any one see you, for Heaven's sake, that is, not mamma, or she will be suspecting I am flown, goodness knows where! I won't tax your patience for more than ten minutes I promise."

So after all she has not proposed a longer promenade for the sake of *his* society, he thinks angrily. It is simply girlish nonsense that she wishes to indulge in, or—perhaps she wants to have a quiet cry over Carl Conway's engagement to Crystal Meredyth. This suspicion ices his tone, and alters his manner strangely.

"I cannot possibly let you go by yourself, but if you *will* go, I will go with you!"

"No! No! Do let me go by myself. What I want so much is to be alone with night, with the silence—with myself," she answers hastily, then she adds quietly:

"You see I have *such* a headache, Lord Delaval."

"I cannot let you go alone," he replies, rather haughtily, dreadfully irritated at her evident reluctance to his company, when he fain would give ten years of his life to be able to catch the slight figure in his arms, and to rain down as many caresses as are his bent on her sweet face, and withal he yearns for the power of making her fold her lovely butterfly wings, to settle down at his feet, possibly to be spurned when sick of her.

"If I let you venture out of my sight at such an hour, what account should I be able to render to Lady Beranger? So you see I must accompany you."

"Then I will go into the house at once," she flashes.

"The most sensible thing for you to do," he says, coldly, and his tone vexes her immensely, for she does not of course know that he is only too willing to stay here, in these quiet, deserted grounds, with myriads of stars overhead, and the great elms casting down cool shadows on them, while he can gaze his fill on what seems to him to-night the rarest loveliness he has looked on in his thirty years.

But Zai, though she fumes inwardly, thinks discretion is the better part of valour and says nothing. In truth, all she longs for is a few moments' quiet, during which she can nerve herself to pass Carl Conway calmly, now that she has found out his duplicity.

And she would have staked her existence on his honour and fidelity!

Turning suddenly, she wanders down the first path and on and on, communing with her own heart, fighting with the love which is greater and stronger than herself, utterly forgetful that a tall, stately form stalks by her side in dignified silence.

Then, when more than ten minutes have elapsed, Lord Delaval's voice rouses her into consciousness of her whereabouts and her supreme folly.

"Well!" he says, "do you think we have had enough of this garden? The dew is falling fast, and I am unsentimental enough to be liable to rheumatism."

Zai stops short and faces him.

"I beg your pardon, Lord Delaval. I—I really forgot you were with me. Let us go back at once, of course."

She has braced up her courage to meet the grand ordeal—the ordeal which she believes will lay her young life in ashes.

It is to look Carl Conway in the face, like Tennyson's Lady Clara Vere de Vere, to slay her unfaithful lover with a glance.

Thinking of this, she hurries on, oblivious again of Lord Delaval's proximity, until they reach the house.

Just as they are on the point of entering, a hand pushes back the lace curtains of the long French casement that gives out on this portion of the lawn, and lies diagonally, as it were, with the path leading up to

the entrance, and without any reason the two pause side by side a moment. Two figures—a man and a woman, stand well relieved against the background of brilliant light. The woman is very tall and slender, and clad in amber flowing drapery, with a blood red pomegranate flower burning vividly against her massive coronet of black hair. The man is also tall, and wears a fair, boyish appearance.

The two voices float out distinctly enough on the stillness outside.

"It is growing very late, and Delaval and your sister, or Beatrice and Benedick, as you call them, have not put in an appearance yet," Sir Everard Aylmer remarks presently, glancing at a tiny enamelled watch he wears.

"Doubtless they have lagged on the lawn for a sociable quarrel. Beatrice and Benedick had a weakness that way, you know," and Gabrielle Beranger laughs somewhat artificially. "According to the hackneyed old proverb, 'the quarrels of lovers are the renewal of love.' "

"Delaval and your sister must be a most interesting pair of lovers," drawls the Baronet with a smile. "Can you tell me, Miss Beranger, why quarrelling should be considered an incipient sign of love?"

"*Dieu*, how should I know? I never take the trouble to quarrel with anyone, and certainly was never in love."

Gabrielle speaks out sharply, and at this moment she believes completely in her assertion, for the knowledge that Lord Delaval is wandering about a dew-lit lawn, with Zai's lovely face at his side, and a white hand laid on his arm, makes her feel as if she positively hates him with all the force with which she is capable of hating as well as loving. That hydra-headed monster, yclept Jealousy, just tears her in twain, and it is with the utmost difficulty she keeps up a calm appearance and a desultory conversation with the man whom Lady Beranger has consigned to her kind devices with a—

"Now don't forget, Gabrielle, that Sir Everard Aylmer is the sixteenth baronet, that he has a purse as long as his pedigree, and is an impressionable fool—you'll never have such a chance again."

"You never take the trouble to quarrel with anyone, and you certainly were never in love?" Sir Everard repeats after her, pretty nearly verbatim, like a parrot. "My dear Miss Beranger, how very dreadful! or rather, how very charming it would be for someone to try to vex you, so that having gone through the first exertion, you may, perchance, fall into the second state."

"Ahem! Hardly probable, I think," she answers carelessly, averting her head, and peering out into the fragrant shadows. But like Sister Anne, she sees no one, and all she hears is the leaf shaken by the wind; not a sign of the absentees meets her sight, and all her pictured enjoyment at Mrs. Meredyth's "At Home" turns into the veriest Dead Sea fruit.

"Will you give me leave to try, Miss Beranger?" pleads a voice that, though drawling in tone, sounds more genuine than the plupart of voices in Tophet.

"To make me quarrel with you? Why, certainly! as the Yankees say; but I warn you that you will not be able to renew the combat a second time."

"Why?"

"Oh, because quarrelling is such a nuisance, and it is so seldom worth making it up again, that I always eschew the acquaintance of the belligerent party, you know," she says flippantly.

At this moment she is not only indifferent to, but she detests the very vision of the position and wealth Lady Beranger has put before her in such glowing terms, and which the "impressionable fool" beside her has it in his power to offer. Gabrielle's heart—if what she has of heart is worthy of the name—is being sorely lacerated by the absence of the only face she loves to look upon, and she recollects fiercely that her sister's grey eyes can gaze their fill on it, while her own glaring black ones are denied.

So she clenches her small fist and in her Bohemian fashion swears inwardly at the cruelty of fate that divides her from Lord Delaval, and barely hears the words of this evidently struck "sixteenth baronet."

"But why should you make that a rule?" he persists.

He is not given to talking, but to-night he seems positively garrulous.

"Beatrice is a most delicious creature, why should you repudiate being like her, Miss Beranger?"

"Because I have no fancy for a Benedick."

"Would you like to be Katherine, then? Is there a Petruchio living at whose bidding you could grow tame?"

Is there? she knows there is, and a bright flush suffuses her face while she acknowledges to herself that at his bidding she would be the veriest slave that ever trod the earth, and she answers all the more impetuously, with her eyes flashing.

"No! no! a hundred times no," and Sir Everard cannot doubt that she answers truly.

She is so handsome, though, in her wild gipsy beauty, that he rouses out of his insular quiet ways of thinking, and decides that it would be a pity to tame her defiant spirit, or to hush the ringing tones of her voice.

"Would a Romeo suit you?" he questions, in such soft womanish accents that her scarlet lips curl as she listens.

"To smother me in sweets, do you mean? oh, no, Sir Everard! *Aucun chemin des fleurs ne conduit à la gloire*, you know, and I have lived such a work-a-day life, before I was brought into the sacred precincts of Belgravia, that to me, love and glory and ambition are synonymous words."

"I have it!" he cries gleefully, like a schoolboy who has succeeded in unravelling a problem of Euclid. "After running through this list of celebrities, I have pitched on the right one to please you; now, 'pon honour, isn't it a Marc Antony you like best?"

"Perhaps he touches me nearer, only I am of such a horrible avaricious nature, and my ambition is so insatiable, that I should prefer some one who would gain a world for me, instead of losing one."

"Almost a fool could do that," he murmurs naïvely, and she, remembering Lady Beranger's opinion of him, bites her lips to control a laugh. "I am sure I could aim at anything if you were not such a bright and

particular star, and I could hope to reach you," he goes on *pêle-mêle*, mixing up prose and poetry in a helplessly dismembered fashion.

Gabrielle laughs out freely at this, a laugh that is a perfect death-blow to sentiment although it is harmonious.

"Now, that's a charmingly turned speech," she replies, "I might almost fancy you a Frenchman. I am sure you have nothing to improve on it in your quiver, so on the principle of a *bonne bouche* we'll go in and report to Lady Beranger that the others have not come in yet. I am afraid she will be angry at such a defiance of the *bienséances*," she adds, but she thinks:

"Not that she will mind a bit, she will only think Lord Delaval is having it all his own way with the aid of his handsome face and that oily tongue of his."

The two move off, and the lace curtains fall back into their place.

Then in a hard sort of voice, Zai turns to her companion:

"I hope you won't be surprised at my speaking to you plainly, Lord Delaval, and don't be shocked if I ignore the convenances in my words."

He is feeling rather irritated against her. The evening had begun as he thought so sweetly, and now a latent suspicion is in his mind that Zai's willingness to be with him so much to-night has proceeded from some *arrière pensée* which he cannot quite divine.

"Continue, and do not mind about shocking me I beg of you; I am capable of standing a good deal, you know," and he gives a curt laugh.

"You heard, of course, all that Gabrielle and Sir Everard Aylmer said about us?"

He bows his head.

"Of course, Lord Delaval, you don't require me to tell you how ridiculous all they said was, and since they were so ridiculous and never would be anything else, imagine how distasteful they are to me."

"Which part of their conversation was distasteful?"

Zai blushes under the starlit sky.

"You *must* know which part," she answers half shyly.

"That part about you and I being *lovers*?"

"Eh, *bien*!"

"Well, we are not, you know."

"Admitted, but that is no reason we should not be."

"Lord Delaval!" she flashes, "what can you be thinking of? You know quite well that you are nothing to me—nothing—and of course I am nothing to you!"

"Zai—don't start, I must call you Zai, for I think of you as such—there is no distance between us two in my thoughts. I can prove to you, too, that you are mistaken in what you say; the man who has learnt to love you with a love that is infinite, a passion that is uncontrollable, and the dearest desire of whose heart is to pass his life in proving that love, cannot possibly be *nothing* to you! while, believe it or not, you are simply *everything* to him!"

"Lord Delaval!"

Carl had asked her whether she would ever allow other men to dare to make love to her, and she had answered that she would sooner die! and here she stands, alone with the starlit sky, the silence and the shadowy trees, herself and a man who not only dares to make love to her but absolutely does it in a possessive positive fashion that takes her breath away in sheer indignation and amazement.

Zai is very young, and, though a daughter of Belgravia, so strangely ignorant of the tricks and wiles of her own and the opposite sex, that for a moment she gasps, and then loses the sense of dignity in anger.

"How *dare* you say such words to me?" she asks, unconsciously using Carlton Conway's word "*dare*." "You know they are false—false as—as *you* are! You know that if you have any love it should be given to Gabrielle or Baby. You ought to be ashamed to say such things to me, when you know how you have made Gabrielle love you!"

"Gabrielle!" he repeats, with a complacent smile. Why! Zai is jealous after all! "Is it possible that you think of her and of me in the same breath? You might accredit me with better taste, I think. Come, Zai! will you let me try and convince you of the sincerity of my love for *you*?" he says softly.

"No! No!" she cries hastily, thinking it is base treason to Carl, even to listen to all this. "No! it would be useless, a waste of time on your part, since I tell you frankly that *I* could never love *you*."

"A good many women say that, and yet learn the lesson of love at last, learn it too well, to their cost," he remarks with supreme conceit.

"It may be so, very likely it is, in fact," she replies as she scans his face, and, in spite of Carl, is fain forced to confess to herself that to women who love physical attraction, this man with his fair languid beauty, his earnest ultramarine eyes, must be irresistible. "But I could never be one of them."

"Do give me leave to try," he whispers in a voice that is wonderfully seductive. "You shall be as free as a bird, only I—I shall be bound—and willingly."

"No! No!" she says, almost sharply.

It is not that she fears temptation, but the very idea of love from anyone but Carl is odious to her.

"I could never care for you. I could never marry you."

"Reconsider that, Zai!"

"If I reconsidered it for ever I should never change my mind!"

Lord Delaval shrugs his shoulders slightly, and fixes his eyes steadily, almost rudely, on her.

"I am not, as a rule, a betting man, or I should be willing to lay very heavy odds that you will live to regret those words, or to unsay them."

Why is it that at this moment an ice cold hand seems to grasp the girl's heart and hold it in a vice? She is really as free as air, no human being has power of compulsion over her, least of all this man who dares to threaten her. Yet she shivers a little in the soft, warm, June air, and without answering a word walks hastily into the house.

Lady Beranger and Gabrielle stand near the entrance of the ball-room, and beyond them Zai sees Carlton Conway, and on his arm, just emerging from the supper-room, Crystal Meredyth.

A faintness creeps over her and her hands grow chill as death, while her face blanches to the hue of a white rose.

It seems too hard, too hard! that he should flaunt his flagrant flirtation with this girl before her very eyes; but she is equal to the occasion. With her dainty head erect, her slender figure pulled up to its utmost height, she passes her mother and sister, Lord Delaval still at her side, and, as she nears her lover and her rival, she looks up, smiles in Lord Delaval's face, and lays her hand on his arm.

"First some supper, and then ten waltzes at least," she says in a bright ringing tone, "and *après cela, le deluge.*"

A little haughty bend to Carl—Carl, whom she is loving at this moment with every fibre of her being, and she is gone, while Lord Delaval shrugs his shoulders once more and presses the little, white-gloved hand to his side, and says to himself with a feeling of complacency:

"*Femme souvent varie—folle qui s'y fie!*"



CHAPTER VI.

MISS FLORA FITZALLAN.

"Love in a hut—with water and a crust
Is, Love forgive us! Cinders—ashes—dust!"

A PRETTY little house, *parfaitement bien monté*, in Halfmoon Street. Plenty of marqueterie and rococo about, heaps of china monstrosities, heaps of nude statuary and glowing pictures, and shoals of devices in the shape of soft armchairs and cushions and sofas, to contribute to the well-being of man.

Altogether a charming little *ménage*, of which the presiding deity is Miss Fitzallan, leading lady at the Bagatelle Theatre.

They have been playing "Hearts *versus* Diamonds" at the theatre to-night, a comedy in three long acts, with a lot of emotional acting, which, when it goes on week after week, is, to say the least, a trifle fatiguing.

The Prince and Princess, accompanied by a party of foreign royalties, have been amongst the audience, and have been demonstrative in their approval. Altogether the evening has been exciting, and the actors are glad when it is over, and each one can drop down from his stilts of artificial feeling to the level of real life.

Miss Fitzallan is tired too; her *rôle* has been the most arduous of all, perhaps, save that of the *jeune amoureux*, who has had to play the handsome but rejected lover, with a passion he can simulate better than he can feel. So the leading lady sinks back into her luxurious little light blue brougham, with an enormous sensation of relief, and is driven quickly to her bijou house, where a small but exquisite supper is laid out.

The covers are for two.

Herself and the *jeune amoureux*.

Flora Fitzallan is past first youth, though she has never owned to more than twenty-three for the last ten years; but dress and the skilful touch of art completely conceal any ravages that time may have imprinted on her face.

On a primary glance, she is beautiful as a dream. On a second and more leisurely inspection, an acute and impartial observer may detect some undeniable flaws in her physiognomy.

Her eyes are a great deal too wide apart, although they are of a velvety brown, and melting in expression, and their brows and lashes are perfect. The nose is a little too *retroussé* or tip-tilted, according to Tennysonian phraseology, and her mouth is large, though the lips are red and tempting. She is a woman on a large scale, with a fulness of form which promises to develop into unromantic fat; but, supper finished, as she stands in a long, trailing white silk, with brilliants sparkling on her hair and neck, and ears and arms, there is really so much grace about her careless attitude, so much of imperial dignity about her, that it is impossible to stop and analyse her defects when her claims to admiration are so evident. She is clever, too, a sharp cleverness with nothing *spirituelle* about it, and, considering her birth and position in the social world, she is ladylike and even fastidious in her tastes. She is quite a woman of the people, with no mysterious aristocracy hanging over her advent into the world. Her father was a bookmaker, well known to every sporting man, and her mother had been one of the ballet at the Alhambra, until years and obesity had displaced her from that honourable berth.

A popular actress at one of the most fashionable London theatres, and a woman about whom several men, from Mayfair to High Holborn, have gone mad, she can have lovers at her feet every hour of the day, and enumerate them by legion; but though Miss Fitzallan is a professional, and attempts no display of prudery, and (this in an aside) very little of morality, she is a woman, with a woman's natural tendency to love one man "*de cœur*" amongst the many aspirants to her favour. This man is—Carlton Conway.

He lies now, extended at full length on quite a sumptuous sofa, with a cigar between his lips, and his eyes closed. He has supped remarkably well, off dainty little dishes and the very best wine, and feels perfectly

comfortable and satisfied physically, but his thoughts are not pleasant, and are wandering far away from his luxurious blue satin nest, within which he is enshrined as a deity, and installed in all the dignity of lover A 1.

He is not thinking of Miss Fitzallan, or of her good looks and success, although half the club men would willingly give some hundreds to fill his place with this charming Aspasia.

He is thinking how coolly Zai Beranger bowled him over for Lord Delaval at the Meredyths' "At Home" two nights ago. He has loved Zai as much as such a nature as his *can* love, but it is a love that is subservient to *amour propre*. He had meant to seek her, to dance with her, to take her out on the lawn, to kiss her, and to believe that she was his, and his only.

And all these intentions were frustrated by his jealous ire at seeing Lord Delaval at her side. To pique her, he had devoted himself to Crystal Meredyth, and the tables had been turned on himself. The haughty little bend of Zai's dainty head, as she passed him on the peer's arm, had railed him more than he has ever been railed in all these years of unprecedented success amongst women, and, impassioned lover as he was of hers, the blow she has given his vanity has loosened her hold entirely upon him. He is not a man to waste his feelings on an unappreciative being. Crystal Meredyth likes him—he knows it, and she has money, lots of bank stock, and horses and diamonds—according to Lord Delaval—at her back, but somehow, Crystal, with all her prettiness, her innocent china-blue eyes, and her naïve conversation, has not caught his fancy, and as he lies here, he is making up his mind to throw Zai's sweet image to the four winds, and to immolate himself and his handsome face and figure on the altar of Moloch. Miss Fitzallan stands patiently watching for a considerable length of time the reverie in which her lover—on and off the stage—is indulging, either forgetful, or else utterly regardless, of her very presence in the room.

She understands Carlton Conway's light, fickle and selfish character, from the top of his head to the sole of his feet.

A man is never known so thoroughly in the domestic relations of life as he is by a woman like this, whose lover he has been since almost the first days of acting together.

With Miss Fitzallan, Carl throws off all restraint, and has no silence, such as he would have to preserve with a woman who was his—wife.

It is at Miss Fitzallan's house that he feels himself completely at home—where he can fling himself *sans cérémonie* with dusty boots on satin sofas, smoke unrebuked the cigar interdicted in other drawing-rooms, and order the dainty dishes he prefers. He has suffered *ennui* covertly in the presence of the *grande dames*, in whose *salons* he had been gratified to find himself, but he yawns unreservedly in the very face of the Aspasia who belongs to him *pro tem*.

To Miss Fitzallan he speaks openly—thinks audibly—and is exactly the same before her as he is by himself. It is Balzac who says that if the mirror of truth be found anywhere, it is probably within the boudoir of Venus.

"Tell me, Carl, what you are thinking of? Is it of that doll of a thing I saw you go and speak to the other night, between the acts? Is it the money I hear she has or her silly face that runs in your head? And yet—no, I don't care to hear it is her face, for then I should be jealous—jealous as a tiger-cat, Carl! and jealousy is an ugly sensation to which I have not been subject, thanks to the goodness of an appreciative public!"

And as she speaks, she walks up to the sofa, and bends over him with a steady, keen look, adding in her tenderest, softest tone:

"Surely, Carl, you are not going to bowl me over for another woman?"

Carl gives a final puff to his nearly consumed cigar, and deliberately removing it from his mouth, throws it negligently into a superb Dresden casket that stands near him on a marble slab. Then he does not rise, but quietly turns over to his side and faces her.

Not a gleam of liking for her could be traced on his handsome aquiline features by the most adept of physiognomists. His eyes have a cold and callous light in them as they meet the fine melting brown orbs that search for a reciprocal look, and the tone of his voice is hard and utterly passionless as he answers her.

"Whatever heart I have is, of course, yours, Flora, but one cannot subsist on love, you see. No one knows this better than you do, judging by all this splendour. You have said you were in love with me—and I believe you are, but nevertheless, that love hasn't been enough for you, and the Duke of Beaudesert, Lord Lennerdale, etc., etc., have all been tolerated when Cupid came, laden with marqueterie and Chelsea, and so on. The 'doll of a thing,' as you are pleased to call Miss Meredyth, is not such a magnificent piece of flesh and blood as yourself—but she is *very respectable!*"

The colour flames up into the leading lady's cheek, her eyes shoot angrily, and for an instant she looks quite plain. His words sting like nettles.

"Very respectable! Did you say that to insult me, Carl? For you know I am not what prudes and fools call very respectable, and I don't want to be! Don't you dare to taunt me, Carl! You will try to marry that Miss Meredyth," she goes on in a sharp voice, her rather ponderous foot beating a tattoo on the velvet pile; "but it will be only for her money. Oh, you cannot deceive me! I, who know each turn of your mind, who read you like an open book! And for an excuse for your paltry, interested motives, you lie there, and talk to me of her—*respectability*. Good heavens! I begin to feel contempt for you—a contempt all fellows deserve when they are ready to sell themselves to the highest bidder!"

A flush slowly mounts into the man's pale cheeks, and he bites his lips hard as he listens to her insolent tone, but he is too lazy by nature to be roused quickly into recrimination, and he cares too little for her to take much heed of her words or contemptuous gestures.

"Flora, you are going too far," he says very quietly, with a callousness that goes far to irritate her more. "You forget whom you are speaking to. Your noble admirers may bow down to your tempers, but I won't. I am too proud to subject myself to them, and too indolent to retort, so, as you are not too amiable, I will wish you good-night, and when we meet again, I hope you will be more pleasant to look at, and to speak to."

"You shan't go, Carl! you and I have been together for three years, and I *won't* have you marry that girl. I'll forbid the banns, and make such a scandal in the church that all London will ring with it."

Carlton Conway looks up at her, and taps his well varnished boot with his silver-headed cane.

"Pshaw, and why?" he asks with an accent of surprise.

Miss Fitzallan regards him fixedly and passionately, then throws herself down tragically on her knees by his side.

"Because I love you, Carl."

"*What* did you say? But enough of this, let us finish this folly at once, Flora! You appear strangely to misunderstand the nature of our relations to one another. If so, you had better rectify your ideas on the subject as soon as possible. The relations that may have existed between us yesterday are not forced to exist to-day. It is the old story, my dear Flora, acted in every part of the world, in every phase of society from the Royalties down to the costermongers, and yet you, sharp as you are, don't seem to comprehend it. It is that in this world there are two sorts of women—one sort, charming like you, lawless like you, to whom a man gives either an hour or a year of his life, according to his own free will—a sort that please him one day, and disgust him the next, who ought not to expect from him anything, but attention sometimes, caprice and changeability always. A sort he takes up without any reality of feeling, and puts down without compunction or remorse. The other sort is like Miss Meredyth, brought up properly, with decent notions and respectable ways. To them a fellow naturally gives his life, his love, his respect, his name, and for these he abandons such as—Flora Fitzallan. You were born to be a plaything for a time; Miss Meredyth was born to be a guardian angel. You have insulted me, my dear Flora, you have credited me with vile interested motives, and forced me to place the above truisms before you, and now, perhaps, you *will* let me go."

He rises slowly, takes his hat, and drawing on his gloves lounges to the door.

Miss Fitzallan looks round, and tries to find in his face some signs of indecision, but fails, and she notices that there is no perceptible lingering in his step.

Frantic jealousy and anger, mingled with love for him, possess her. He is really the only man she has loved, and whose companionship has given her any genuine happiness in her tinsel existence of stage spangles and hypocrisy; without him she thoroughly believes she cannot live.

"Carl, come back, don't leave me like this," she cries pitifully. "If my love for you has made me say one word to vex you, see, I ask your pardon on my knees, for Carl, you know how I love you, worship you, that there is nothing in the whole world that I would not sacrifice for you and your good except the sight of you, Carl, and that I *must* have or die! Come back, and give me a kiss of forgiveness, and if you say anything horrid I will be mum."

Miss Fitzallan has assumed a pose that would bring down the house if she were on the stage at this moment. It is so fine, so artistic, and she has called up all the emotional fire she knows into her big brown eyes, exerting herself as much to chain and enchant this man as though she was the cynosure of all London. It seems to her at this moment that there is but only one thing worth striving for, or existing for, and that is Carlton Conway's devotion.

Her nature is perverse like other women's, coveting what seems difficult to gain, undervaluing what is willingly offered.

"My dear Flora, now you are yourself again," he says carelessly, just sweeping his moustache across her brow, and then sinking into the arms of a capacious *fauteuil*, "and I don't mind confiding to you the lamentable fact that I am deuced hard up. What with garments for the stage, and off the stage, button-holes for the Park and the balls (Hooper in Oxford Street had the impudence to charge me three-and-sixpence for a gardenia the other day), I am just at the end of my tether. I want a new hat, new gloves, a new kit altogether, and devil a bit do I know who to squeeze the tin out of. I *must* sacrifice myself to a fortune, you see."

"Oh, Carl, but it's hateful the thought of your marrying anyone else. If it wasn't for some silly prejudice you might marry me; I have got heaps of money you know."

Yes, he does know, and that how the money was got is a fact that it is better not to enquire into. Marry her? marry the leading lady of the Bagatelle Theatre? when he is a regular swell himself, in spite of his being an actor! The shade of his uncle, the Marquis of Eversleigh, forbid it!

He stares at her incredulously, and seeing she is in earnest bursts into a loud laugh.

The next moment he asks her pardon for his rudeness, for Carl is a gentleman born.

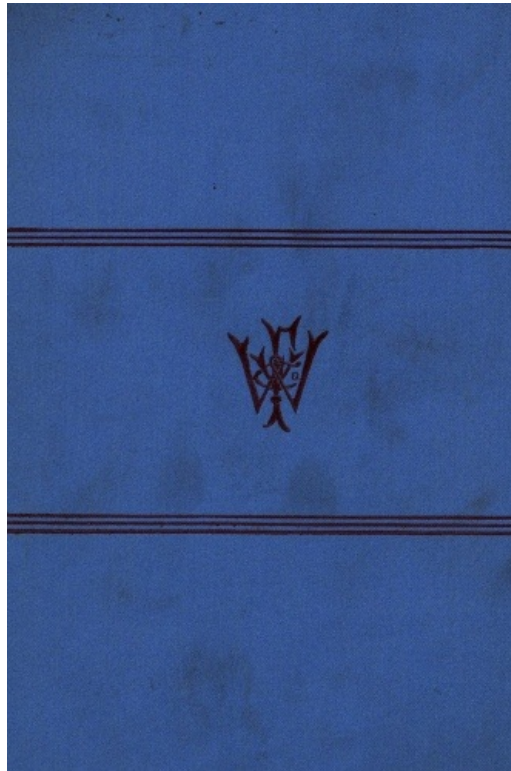
"You are cruel to me, very cruel," she sobs, always with a due regard to the artistic, "but you will promise me one thing, won't you, Carl? It is that, once married, and the fortune secured, I shall see you again as often as I do now."

"All right, Flora, but that will be on one condition. It is that you won't bother me with letters or anything. Letters are so deuced dangerous, you know, especially if one's wife gets hold of them, and grows close-fisted with the pocket-money. If I marry Crystal Meredyth," he adds to himself, "she'll have to fork out pretty considerably to make up for the amount of insipid talk that falls from her lips. Now if it was Zai! Ah! I'd take her with nothing, and work like a slave to keep my dainty little girl clothed like a princess, but she has thrown me over for that lardy-dardy swell, and joy go with her."

"Good-night, Flora," he says, rising lazily, "and mind and keep my counsel. If father and mother Meredyth, who are the properest couple alive, were to hear one whisper about you, they would send me flying."

"I'll keep your counsel, Carl; I wouldn't injure a hair of your head, not to save my life."

"Well, perhaps you wouldn't, little woman, or perhaps you would, *cela selon*. I never had much faith in mankind, or womankind either to say the truth, and I am too old in worldly wisdom to begin now—ta-ta."



*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DAUGHTERS OF BELGRAVIA; VOL. 1 OF 3 ***

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